



THE 18th PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL



The latest volume
in the original bestselling series

The 18th Pan Book of Horror Stories

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Edited by Herbert van Thal

The 18th Pan Book of Horror Stories

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Meat

The old Russian must have been a hundred years old if he was a day. He had a face like gnarled mahogany from which sprouted a great, shaggy white beard that reached down to his waist. He sat on a mountain of embroidered cushions smoking a yellowed pipe, and his eyes, although half obscured by pouches of ancient flesh, were bright and black like a snake's.

His clothes were curiously old-fashioned and made from expensive silk, the jacket in scarlet and the voluminous pantaloons in bright ochre. The latter were tucked into shiny boots which themselves were inlaid with a tracery of silver. On his head was a tall astrakhan fur hat which gave him a hint of noble bearing, and I took him to be a rare aristocratic survivor of pre-1917 Russia.

He saw me staring at him and seemed amused as I blushed. 'Come here,' he said suddenly, beckoning with his pipe, and I was surprised that he spoke English, albeit with a throaty Russian accent. Something about those glittering black eyes drew me to him at once and I sat on the plump cushions next to him.

'Your name, little boy!' he demanded, breathing twin jets of smoke from his nostrils.

'Gordon Brand,' I said at once, my fifteen-year-old Scottish lilt contrasting strangely with his gravel tones.

'On holiday?' he said, almost accusingly and I nodded. In those days I was a nervous youth, virtually in terror of all adults and this ancient Russian seemed more terrible than anybody I had ever met.

'What do you think of Istanbul?' he said. 'Strange place for a holiday, eh?' I glanced around, hoping to catch a glimpse of my father so that he might rescue me from my predicament but he had vanished into the depths of the bazaar. The old Russian seemed to sense my discomfiture and his face creased into a smile transforming that hitherto ferocious mien into a sem-

blance of friendship. 'Come, come, now,' he said, 'speak up, boy, I won't eat you!'

I smiled weakly and fidgeted with my straw hat, which I had automatically removed.

'If you please, sir,' I said, 'I'm waiting for my father.'

The old Russian sucked at his pipe, his mouth and cheeks puckering like a leather glove.

'And who might your father be then, boy?'

'Sir George Brand, of the Foreign Office, sir.'

At this information the old man's eyes glittered and he extended a brown, horny palm. Nervously I took it, and we shook hands. His left hand, I noticed, he kept tucked inside the folds of his tunic.

'Would you like to hear a story, boy?' he said. 'A yarn you can take back to England with you?'

'Scotland, sir,' I blurted with unexpected courage.

'Ah,' said the Russian, 'Scotland, of course. No matter. I shall tell my tale, and you will listen, and you will marvel at it and perhaps when your father returns he will buy some of my beautiful silks to take home.'

He laid down his yellow pipe in a dish and pulled back the sleeve that obscured his left arm. There was no hand at the end of the wrist, just a nub of pinkish flesh that terminated an inch below the elbow.

'I'll tell you how I came to lose it,' he continued, ignoring my sharp intake of breath. 'It was in the winter of 1854 and I was a young student in Tashkent, impecunious and in love. The object of my adolescent passion was a woman some years my senior, although still young herself. She was the wife of a wealthy merchant who was away on business in Persia and I begged her to leave him and set up home with me. Of course she rejected this offer, regarding me as little more than a diversion, a plaything to while away her leisure hours. I continued to plead with her until she became angry, we quarrelled bitterly and eventually, to my great humiliation, she terminated the affair and sent me packing. Only those who have experienced the bittersweet agony of adolescent love could understand just how badly I felt. A kind of madness overwhelmed me and I quit my studies, resolving to become a nomad and wander the Siberian Wastes alone for the rest of my life. For nearly a year I did just that, drifting from village to village subsisting on berries and

nuts and the occasional hunk of bread begged from peasants in the field. The Russian winter is the cruellest in the world and I suffered frostbite which took off three of my toes. At length I came to my senses and decided to seek employment. It wasn't easy for my brain had grown idle with the nomadic drifting and the scourging cold. I found a tiny village near the Caspian Sea and there after much pleading obtained a post as a scullery boy to the local priest. He was a loathsome, pious cleric with great, fat, beringed fingers and a perfumed beard. He had the appetite of a bear and I was kept very busy in the stone-flagged scullery preparing vegetables and stripping meat for his six meals a day.

'The church in which he officiated was a superb old building dating back to the twelfth century, with golden minarets and fabulous twisted columns – not unlike a smaller version of the famous Saint Basil's Cathedral in Moscow.

'After some weeks in his employ the priest allowed me into the church itself and I helped another servant to clean the various holy ornaments. This fellow was something of a dullard and looked upon the task as no more than just another chore. I, however, was dazzled by the splendour of the objects we handled. Superb icons with tiny painted figures of the saints, solid gold sceptres encrusted with emerald and lapis lazuli, silver crowns from the Holy Roman Empire (how they came to reside in this obscure Russian village I'll never know), numerous chalices, all gold, and many other priceless items.

'Months passed and the brief summer made life more tolerable. I became used to the concept of labour and even began to enjoy it. The priest was a man of gross habits and one morning I caught him by chance ravishing a peasant girl behind the altar. He was so incensed at being discovered he beat me savagely with a knout and banned me from setting foot inside the church again. Henceforth I was to confine myself to the kitchens and the duties of a scullery boy.

'This was a grave disappointment to me as I had become obsessed with the fabulous treasures of the church and loved to handle them and polish them until they gleamed like the sun. I had taken to laying awake at nights, and imagining what I would do if they belonged to me. My fantasies included a country dacha outside Moscow, a big town house, servants, fine clothes, crates of French champagne, a box at the opera – how I dreamed! I recalled with pangs of melancholy my abortive love

affair with my merchant's wife in Tashkent, and how cruelly she had used me.

'It was then that the germ of an idea began to form in my mind. Supposing I took some of the treasures from the church – not so many as to be conspicuous, but enough to make me moderately rich? I could sell them in a distant city, return in triumph to Tashkent, and claim my lady love who, seeing her young ex-beau emerge as a prosperous businessman, would surely not hesitate in leaving her husband and starting a new life. This mad notion filled my every waking moment until eventually it became an obsession. I *would* do it. I *would* succeed.

'Summer passed and the air took on an icy chill as the wind blew off the Steppes, and the trees turned gold and shed their leaves. The villagers pulled the shutters over their windows in preparation for winter. As the first snow began to fall I resolved to put my plan into action. It was full of skill and daring and I was very proud of it.

'At midnight on a Saturday I crept from my pallet of skins behind the kitchen range and made my way to the stables. The horses were restless in their stalls, pawing the ground and snorting, and I selected two of the liveliest and led them out into the moonlit yard. Here I harnessed them side by side to a large sled with rugs and boxes of food from the kitchen, and positioned it alongside the church. The next part was the most dangerous and my heart was pounding like a blacksmith's hammer. I scaled the ivy-clad wall of the church and clambered in through a tiny stained-glass window which I had previously loosened in its lead frame. Inside the church fat yellow candles burned on the altar and it smelled of incense and stale human sweat. Slowly, painstakingly, I selected my booty and carried it, piece by piece, out through the window and stacked it under the rugs on the sled. It took me nearly an hour to complete the task and the night had grown bitter with intermittent flurries of snow. It would have been easier had I been able to gain access by the main church door but I knew it was double-locked by the priest each night before he retired. Eventually I decided that I had enough treasure to make me a comfortable fortune, even if sold at a fraction of its true value. The sled was loaded with four gold sceptres, two jewelled crowns, numerous rings and some silver-encrusted tapestries of Byzantine design. Stealthily I

settled into the driver's seat and picked up the reins. The horses, their black bodies dusted with snow, needed very little encouragement and as I flicked their haunches with the long, gleaming coach whip, they plunged forward with a jangle of harness. The main street of the village was narrow and it was impossible to go fast, so I held the prancing horses to a trot as we manoeuvred the twists and the turns.

'We rounded a particularly sharp bend and the sled runners hit a patch of bare cobblestones on which the snow had melted. The scraping noise made the horses swerve violently and we became wedged against the wall of a tiny cottage. Cursing, I leapt from the sled and tried to push it away from the obstruction but my feet slithered in the snow. I sprang back into my seat and slashed the whip across the horses' backs. They reared in their traces and the leathers creaked, then they plunged forward straining to gallop. The sled rasped along the surface of the wall and we were free. The commotion, however, had disturbed the village and I saw candles gleam behind the frosted windows. I urged the horses on, anxious to reach the pine forest at the outskirts of the village, while behind me I heard loud cries and the slamming of doors. We slithered into the market square and I loosened the reins, giving the horses their heads. As I skimmed into the big open space I saw a group of figures running towards us - local militia-men, muskets at the ready, and the officer in charge was waving frantically for me to stop. With the wisdom of hindsight I know now that I should have heeded the command, but instead with growing panic I attempted to ride straight through them. When they saw my intention they scattered like ninepins and rolled sideways in the snow. I heard a hoarse cry and then the deafening crack of a musket. A split second later my left elbow was shattered as the shot found its target. The impact threw me forward in the sled and I lay there for several seconds, unable to move. By now the horses had really got the wind under their tails and were careering towards the pine forest. It was an eerie sensation as the sounds of the village faded behind us and were replaced by the hiss of the sled runners and the muffled thump of hoofbeats on the snow.

'We must have covered several *versts* before I was able to drag myself into a sitting position and take up the reins. My left arm was on fire with pain and I could see the blood spreading through my tunic sleeve. I tried to move the arm but it hung

there, quite useless. With my right hand I began to regain control of the horses and after much pulling I coaxed them down to a slow trot. By now I reckoned I was safely out of reach of the village and could afford to take stock of my situation. I pulled up by a clump of trees and examined my elbow. The shot had passed clean through it, severing the tendons and smashing the bone. Oddly enough the pain had reduced to a dull ache and I was sure I could bear it until dawn. Then I resolved I would find another village and get it properly dressed; meantime some emergency first-aid was required. I tore some strips from the rugs and bound the wound as tightly as I could. Thus secured, I felt my confidence return and picked up the coach whip. Two hours later the snow had stopped and although still bitterly cold it was a beautiful night. Big stars embroidered the sky and the pine trees sparkled with frozen drops. I decided to push eastwards as my earlier study of the local maps had suggested this would bring me to a cluster of tiny villages nestling at the foothills of a vast mountain range.

'Regrettably my sense of geography was not as accurate as it should have been and within a further two hours I was still in the forest and there was no sign of so much as a molehill, let alone a mountain range. The cold had got to me and my body felt raw and brittle. My wounded arm had begun to throb and all in all I felt pretty desperate. The horses, thank God, were still pulling well and I slumped back in my seat, trying to think of the fortune in gold that lay beneath the rugs of the sled. It was then, quite suddenly, that I heard it for the first time: the thin, chilling, eldritch cry of the wolf. The horses reacted at once, prancing and lunging in their traces, and it was as much as I could do to hold them from bolting. I scanned the trees for signs but saw nothing but snow and darkness and the endless mass of pines. The track sloped forward and we gathered speed, hissing over the iron-hard ground with its mantle of soft whiteness until we were clear of the forest and out on a huge, desolate plain. When the wolf cry came the second time it was much closer, and directly to our left. I cut the horses across their backs and drove them immediately into full gallop. Then I saw the wolves, fifty yards to our left and keeping pace with us, a pack of eight bounding along with their heads lowered and their tails streaming behind them. The leader was a huge grey with a pointed snout and a curious leaping gait. Although we were

going at full tilt the pack seemed to be merely pacing us and gave the impression of moving quite effortlessly over the gleaming ground.

'I knew enough about wolves to be certain that they would keep their distance until they sensed that we were run out. Then they would move in, the leader forming the apex of a "V" and initiating the attack. I was seized by a fear so strong that I could actually taste it. Savagely I whipped the horses but already they were beginning to fade, their hoofbeats losing rhythm and their heads plunging as they strained to escape the lash.

'The wolf pack suddenly veered to the right and re-formed directly behind us, closing the gap to a mere twenty yards. I looked over my shoulder and saw them clearly, like the hounds of hell, the snow flying up from their loping paws, their heads carried low and their devil eyes blazing like rubies.

'Frantically I seized a box of food from the sled and tossed it overboard. It bounced in the snow and then burst open, scattering its contents on the wind. The pack ignored it and closed another ten yards. Now I could see their breath like plumes of smoke against the freezing air, and their glistening red tongues.

'The horses were labouring badly and I knew it was only a matter of minutes before those yellow fangs would sink into my flesh and tear it into bloody ribbons. Sobbing with fear and anguish I grabbed the nearest gold sceptre and heaved it overboard, then the next and the next until I had jettisoned all my treasure and the sled was hundreds of kilos lighter. The horses responded, and with a whoop of triumph I saw the gap widen between the sled and the wolf pack. The plain began to slope forward into what looked like a valley with outcrops of rock and on the far side a dense pine forest. The horses stumbled on the uneven ground and I saw sparks fly up as one of them struck his hoof on a rock. The wolves moved closer and the leader raised his head. If any man asks you what it is like to look death in the face - then you could give him no better description. The jaws gaped and I swear those devil eyes met mine, and held them. What followed seemed like a dream, or even a nightmare. I drew a knife from my belt and hacked off my wounded arm just below the elbow. I can recall to this day how easily the deed was done, and how little pain I actually felt. I took the grisly, bloodied object and stood up in the sled, turning to face the pack that was now only five yards behind us.

"Here!" I screamed at them. "Here's your meat!" I threw the severed arm high in the air and it fell into the middle of the pack. All at once they broke formation and set up a great flurry of snow. I heard snarling and rending and squealing – and then silence.

The horses were pulling forward at a ragged trot and I slid down on to the rugs sobbing like a madman. I must have passed out, for mercifully I can recall no more until I arrived at a tiny village with the horses hanging half-dead in their traces.'

The old Russian picked up his yellow pipe and relit it with a flourish. For a moment I thought he wouldn't speak again but he leant towards me and I could smell the harsh tobacco on his breath.

'So, Master Brand. That's how I came to lose my arm! There's a tale to tell, eh? You'll take that tale back to Scotland with you, won't you, boy?'

I was about to answer when I felt a hand on my shoulder, turned and saw my father. He glanced distastefully at the Russian and pulled me to my feet.

'Come, Gordon,' he said sternly, 'we shall miss our tea.'

The old Russian reached for a bale of silk but before he could utter another word I was being hustled through the crowds to my father's waiting carriage.

It was only later, in the cool of the British residence, that my father allowed me to touch on the subject. We were having tea in the study and I had been treated to a double ration of chocolate biscuits. My father folded his napkin carefully and placed it on the table.

'Well now, Gordon,' he said, 'what outrageous tale did old Petrovsky tell you, then? How he lost his left arm?'

I nodded. 'Yes, Father. Do you know him?'

My father laughed and I saw his eyes roll as they always did when he was amused.

'Know him!' said my father. 'I'll say I know the scoundrel. What yarn did he spin this time – crocodiles in Egypt or wrestling with a bear in the Himalayas?'

'Neither,' I said indignantly. 'It was a ravening wolf pack. He threw his arm to them in order to save his life.'

My father laughed even louder at this and rang the bell for further supplies of chocolate biscuits.

'I'll give old Petrovsky his due,' said my father. 'He's got one

hell of an imagination. Do you know, Gordon, he tells visitors to the bazaar a different story every day – and they are usually so enthralled that they end up buying his silks at inflated prices. Oddly enough, I know how he really lost his arm, and truth being stranger than fiction it would make a splendid story in itself but old Petrovsky won't tell it. He prefers the world of make-believe.'

'Oh do tell me, Father,' I pleaded, momentarily forgetting the chocolate biscuits.

My father smiled and settled back in his chair.

'Balaclava 1854. Petrovsky was on the Russian guns along the Causeway Heights during the charge of the Light Brigade. One of Lord Cardigan's gallant 17th took off his arm with a sabre cut. The story goes that old Petrovsky was so sickened by the slaughter he saw that day he resigned the Czar's commission and came to Istanbul. He's been here ever since.'

The bravest rat in Venice

The household at the Palazzo Cecchini on the Rio San Polo was a happy, lively one: husband and wife and six children ranging from two to ten years of age, four boys and two girls. This was the Mangoni family, and they were the caretakers. The owners of the Palazzo Cecchini, an English-American couple named Whitman, were away for three months, and probably longer, in London, staying at their townhouse there.

'It's a fine day! We'll open the windows and sing! And we'll *clean up* this place!' yelled Signora Mangoni from the kitchen as she untied her apron. She was eight months pregnant. She had washed up the breakfast dishes, swept away the bread-crumbs, and was facing the crisp, sunny day with the joy of a proprietress. And why not? She and her family had the run of every room, could sleep in whatever beds they wished, and furthermore had plenty of money from the Whitmans to run things in a fine style.

'Can we play downstairs, mama?' asked Luigi, aged ten, in a perfunctory way. Mama would say 'No!' he supposed, and he and a couple of brothers and maybe his sister Roberta would go anyway. Wading, slipping, falling in the shallow water down there was great fun. So was startling the passing gondoliers and their passengers just outside the canal door by suddenly opening the door and heaving a bucket of water – maybe on to a tourist's lap.

'No!' said mama. 'Just because today is a holiday—'

Luigi, Roberta and their two brothers Carlo and Arturo went to school officially. But they had missed a lot of days in the last month since the Mangoni family had full possession of the Palazzo Cecchini. It was more fun than school to explore the house, to pretend to own everything, to be able to open any door without knocking. Luigi was about to give a hail to Carlo to join him, when his mother said:

'Luigi, you promised to take Rupert for a walk this morning!'

Had he? The promise, if made, did not weigh much on Luigi's conscience. 'This afternoon.'

'No, this morning. Untie the dog!'

Luigi sighed and went in a waddling, irritated way to the kitchen corner where the Dalmatian was tied to the foot of a tile stove.

The dog was growing plump, and that was why his mother wanted him or Carlo to walk him a couple of times a day. The dog was plump because he was given risotto and pasta instead of the meat diet recommended by Signor Whitman, Luigi knew. Luigi had heard his parents discussing it, and the discussion had been brief: with the price of meat what it was, why feed a *dog bistecca*? It was an absurdity, even if they had been given the money for it. The dog could just as well eat stale bread and milk, and there were some fish and clam bits after all in the risotto leftovers. A dog was a dog, not a human being. The Mangoni family were now eating meat.

Luigi compromised by letting Rupert lift his leg in the narrow street outside the front door of the palazzo, summoned Carlo who was strolling homeward with a half-finished soda pop in hand, and together they went, with the dog, down the steps behind a door of the front hall.

The water looked half a metre deep. Luigi laughed in anticipation, pushed off his sandals and removed his socks on the steps.

Schluck-slosh! The dark water moved, blindly lapped into stone corners, rebounded. The big, empty square room was semi-dark. Two slits of sunlight showed on either side of the loose door. Beyond the door were more stone steps which went right down into the water of the rather wide canal called the Rio San Polo. Here for several hundred years, before the palazzo had sunk so much, gondolas had used to arrive, discharging well-dressed ladies and gentlemen with dry feet into the marble-floored salon where Luigi and Carlo now splashed and slipped in water nearly up to their knees.

The dog Rupert shivered on one of the steps the boys had come down. He was not so much chilly as nervous and bored. He did not know what to do with himself. His routine of happy walks three times a day, milk and biscuits in the morning, a big meal of meat around 6 p.m. — all that was gone. His life now was a miserable chaos, and his days had lost their shape.

It was November, but not cold, not too cold for Luigi's and Carlo's informal game of push-the-other. First man down lost, but was rewarded by applause and laughter from the others – usually Roberta and little sister Benita were wading too, or watching from the steps.

'A rat!' Luigi cried, pointing, lying, and at that instant gave Carlo a good push behind his knees, causing Carlo to collapse on his back in the water with a great hollow-sounding splash that hit the walls and peppered Luigi with drops.

Carlo scrambled to his feet, soaked, laughing, making for the steps where the trembling dog stood.

'Look! There's a real one!' Luigi said, pointing.

'Ha-ha!' said Carlo, not believing.

'There it is!' Luigi slashed the surface of the water with his hand, trying to aim the water at the ugly thing swimming between him and the steps.

'Sissi!' Carlo shrieked with glee and waded towards a floating stick.

Luigi snatched the stick from him and came down with it on the rat's body – an unsatisfactory blow, rather sliding off the rat's back. Luigi struck again.

'Grab him by the tail!' giggled Carlo.

'Get a knife, we'll kill it!' Luigi spoke with bared teeth, excited by the fact the rat might dive and nip one of his feet with a fatal bite.

Carlo was already splashing up the stairs. His mother was not in the kitchen, and he at once seized a meat knife with a triangular blade, and ran back with it to Luigi.

Luigi had battered the rat twice more, and now with the knife in his right hand, he was bold enough to grab the rat's tail and whirl him up on to a marble ledge as high as Luigi's hips.

'Ah-i-i! Kill 'im!' Carlo said.

Rupert whined, lifting his head, thought of going up the steps, since his lead dangled, and could not come to any decision, because he had no purpose in going up.

Luigi made a clumsy stab at the rat's neck, while still holding its tail, missed the neck and struck an eye. The rat writhed and squealed, showing long front teeth, and Luigi was on the brink of releasing its tail out of fear, but came down once more with a blow he intended to be decapitating, but he cut off a front foot instead.

'Ha-ha-ha!' Carlo clapped his hands, and wildly splashed water, more on Luigi than the rat.

'*Bastard rat!*' cried Luigi.

For a few seconds the rat was motionless, with open mouth. Blood flowed from its right eye, and Luigi came down with the blade on the rat's right hind foot which was extended with splayed toes, vulnerable against the stone. The rat bit, caught Luigi in the wrist.

Luigi screamed and shook his arm. The rat fell off into the water, and began to swim wildly away.

'Oooh!' said Carlo.

'Ow!' Luigi swished his arm back and forth in the water and examined his wrist. It was merely a pink dot, like a pin-prick. He'd been wanting to exaggerate his prowess to his mother, have her nurse his wound, but he'd have to make do with this. '*It hurts!*' he assured Carlo, and made his way through the water towards the steps. Tears had already come to his eyes, though he felt no pain at all. '*Mama!*'

The rat scabbled with one stump of a forepaw and his other good paw against a mossy stone wall, keeping his nose above water as best he could. Around him the water was pinkening with blood. He was a young rat, five months old and not fully grown. He had never been in this house before, and had come in at the street side via a dry alley or slit along one side of the wall. He had smelled food, or thought he had, rotting meat or some such. A hole had led through the wall, and he had tumbled into water before he knew it, water so deep he had had to swim. Now his problem was to find an exit. His left foreleg and right hind leg smarted, but his eye hurt worse. He explored a bit, but found no hole or slit of escape, and at last he clung to slimy threads of moss by the claws of his right forefoot and was still, rather in a daze.

Some time later, chill and numb, the rat moved again. The water had gone down a little, but the rat was not aware of this, because he still had to swim. Now a narrow beam of light showed in a wall. The rat made for this, squeezed through, and escaped from the watery dungeon. He was in a kind of sewer in semi-darkness. He found an exit from this: a crack in a pavement. His next hours were a series of short journeys to an ashcan's shelter, to a doorway, to a shadow behind a tub of flowers. He was, in a circuitous way, heading for home. The rat

had no family as yet, but was indifferently accepted in the house or headquarters of several rat families where he had been born. It was dark when he got there – the cellar of an abandoned grocery store, long ago plundered of anything edible. The cellar's wooden door was falling apart, which made entry easy for the rats, and they were in such number no cat would have ventured to attack them in their lair, which had no escape route for a cat but the way the cat would have come.

Here the rat nursed his wounds for two days, unassisted by parents who did not even recognize him as offspring, or by relatives either. At least he could nibble on old veal bones, mouldy bits of potato, things that rats had brought in to chew in peace. He could see out of only one eye, but already this was making him more alert, quicker in darting after a crumb of food, quicker in retreating in case he was challenged. This period of semi-repose and recuperation was broken by a torrent of hose water early one morning.

The wooden door was kicked open and the blast of water sent baby rats flying up in the air, smashed a few against the wall, killing them by the impact or drowning them, while adult rats scrambled up the steps past the hose-holder to be met by clubs crashing on their heads and backs, huge rubber-booted feet stamping the life out of them.

The crippled rat remained below, swimming a bit finally. Men came down the steps with big nets on sticks, scooping up corpses. They dumped poison into the water which now covered the stone floor. The poison stank and hurt the rat's lungs. There was a back exit, a hole in a corner just big enough for him to get through, and he used it. A couple of other rats had used it also, but the rat did not see them.

It was time to move on. The cellar would never be the same again. The rat was feeling better, more self-assured and more mature. He walked and crept, sparing his two sore stumps. Before noon, he discovered an alley at the back of a restaurant. Not all the garbage had fallen into the bins. Pieces of bread, a long steakbone with meat on it lay on the cobblestones. It was a banquet! Maybe the best meal of his life. After eating, he slept in a dry drainpipe, too small for a cat to enter. Best to keep out of sight in daylight. Life was safer at night.

The days passed. The rat's stumps grew less painful. Even his eye had ceased to hurt. He regained strength and even put on a

little weight. His grey, slightly brownish coat became thick and sleek. His ruined eye was a half-closed, greyish splotch, a bit jagged because of the knife's thrust, but it was no longer running either with blood or lymph. He discovered that by charging a cat, he could make the cat retreat a bit, and the rat sensed that it was because he presented an unusual appearance, limping on two short legs, one eye gone. The cats too had their tricks, puffing their fur up to make themselves look bigger, making throaty noises. But only once had an old ginger tomcat, mangy and with one ear gone, tried to close his teeth on the back of the rat's neck. The rat had at once attacked a front leg of the cat, bitten as hard as he could, and the cat had never got a grip. When the rat had turned loose, the cat had been glad enough to run away and leap to a windowsill. That had been in a dark garden somewhere.

The days came and went and grew ever colder and wetter, days of sleep in a patch of sun if possible, more often not, because a hole somewhere was safer, nights of prowling and feeding. And day and night the dodging of cats and the up-raised stick in the hands of a human being. Once a man had attacked him with a dustbin, slammed it down on the stones, catching the rat's tail but not cutting any of it off, only giving him *pain* such as he had not known since the stab in his eye.

The rat knew when a gondola was approaching. 'Ho! Aye!' the gondoliers would shout, or variations of this, usually when they were about to turn a corner. Gondolas were no threat. Sometimes the gondolier jabbed at him with an oar, more out of playfulness than to kill him. Not a chance had the gondolier! Just one stab that always missed, and the gondolier had glided past in his boat.

One night, smelling sausage from a tied-up gondola in a narrow canal, the rat ventured on board. The gondolier was sleeping under a blanket. The sausage smell came from a paper beside him. The rat found the remains of a sandwich, ate his fill, and curled up in a coarse, dirty rag. The gondola bobbed gently. The rat was an expert swimmer now. Many a time he had dived underwater to escape a cat that had been bold enough to pursue him into a canal. But cats didn't care to go below the surface.

The rat was awakened by a bumping sound. The man was standing up, untying a rope. The gondola moved away from the pavement. The rat was not alarmed. If the man saw him and

came at him, he would simply jump overboard and swim to the nearest wall of stones.

The gondola crossed the Canale Grande and entered a widish canal between huge palaces which were now hotels. The rat could smell the aromas of fresh roasting pork, baking bread, orange peel and the sharper scent of ham. Some time later, the man manœuvred the gondola to the steps of a house, got out and banged on a door with a round ring of a knocker. From the gunwale, the rat saw a decaying portion of the embankment that would offer foothold, jumped into the water and made for it. The gondolier heard the splash and stomped towards him, yelling 'Aye-yeh!' So the rat didn't climb up at that spot, but swam on, found another accessible place and got to dry pavement. The gondolier was back at the door, knocking again.

That day the rat met a female, a pleasant encounter in a rather damp alley behind a dress shop. It had just rained. Pushing on, the rat found a trail, almost, of sandwich ends, dropped peanuts, and hard corn kernels which he didn't bother with. Then he found himself in a large open area. It was the Piazza San Marco, where the rat had never been. He could not see all its vastness, but he sensed it. Pigeons in greater numbers than he had ever seen walked about on the pavement among people who were tossing grain to them. Pigeons sailed down, spread their wings and tails and landed on the backs of others. The smell of popcorn made the rat hungry. But it was broad daylight, and the rat knew he must be careful. He kept to the angle made by the pavement and the walls of the buildings, ready to duck into a passageway. He seized a peanut and nibbled it as he hobbled along, letting the shell fall, keeping the peanut in his mouth, retrieving the other half of the peanut which held a second morsel.

Tables and chairs. And music. Not many people sat in the chairs, and those who did wore overcoats. Here were all manner of croissant crumbs, bread crusts, even bits of ham on the stone pavement among the chairs.

A man laughed and pointed to the rat. 'Look, Helen!' he said to his wife. 'Look at that rat! At this time of day!'

'Oh! What a *creature!*' The woman's shock was genuine. She was nearly sixty, and from Massachusetts. Then she laughed, a laugh of relief, amusement, and with a little bit of fear.

'Good God, somebody's cut his feet off!' the man said in

almost a whisper. 'And one eye's gone! Look at him!'

'Now *that's* something to tell the folks back home!' said the woman. 'Hand me the camera, Alden!'

The husband did so. 'Don't do it now, the waiter's coming.'

'*Altro, signor?*' asked the waiter politely.

'*No, grazie. Ah, sì! Un caffè latte, per piacere.*'

'Alden—'

He wasn't supposed to have more than two coffees a day, one morning, one evening, Alden knew. He had only a few months to live. But the rat had given him a curious zest, a sudden joy. He watched the rat nosing nervously in the forest of chair legs just three feet away, peering with his good eye, darting for the crumbs, eschewing the small, the inferior, the already crushed. 'Do it now before he goes,' said Alden.

Helen lifted the camera.

The rat sensed the movement, one of potential hostility, and glanced up.

Click!

'I think that'll be good!' Helen whispered, laughing with a gentle happiness as if she'd just taken the sunset at Sounion or Acapulco.

'In this rat,' Alden began, also speaking softly, and interrupted himself to pick with slightly trembling fingers the end of a dainty frankfurter from the buttery little bun in front of him. He tossed it towards the rat, which drew back a little, then darted for the sausage and got it, chewed it with one foot — the stump — planted on it. Suddenly the sausage vanished from view, and the plump jowls worked. 'Now that rat has fortitude!' Alden said finally. 'Imagine what he's been through. Like Venice itself. And he's not giving up. Is he?'

Helen returned her husband's smile. Alden looked happier, better than he had in weeks. She was pleased. She felt grateful to the rat. Imagine being grateful to a rat, she thought. When she looked again, the rat had vanished. But Alden was smiling at her.

'We're going to have a splendid day,' he said.

'Yes.'

Daily the rat grew stronger, bolder about venturing out in the day-time, but he was also learning more about protecting himself, even against people. He might make a dash as if to attack a person who was lifting a broom, a stick, a crate to smash him,

and the person, man or woman, would retreat a step, or hesitate, and in that instant the rat could run in any direction, even past the person, if that direction meant escape.

More female rats. When in the mood, the rat had his pick of the females, because other males were afraid of him, and their challenges, if any, never came to a real fight. The rat with his heavy, rolling gait and his evil, single eye had a menacing air, a look that said nothing would stop him but death. He thrust his way through the maze of Venice, at seven months rolling like an old sea captain, sure of himself and sure of his ground. Mothers pulled their small children away from him in horror. Older children laughed and pointed. Mange attacked his stomach and head. He rolled on cobblestones to relieve the itching sometimes, or plunged into water despite the cold. He ranged from the Rialto to San Trovaso, and was familiar with the warehouses on the Ponte Lungo which bordered the broad Canale della Giudecca.

The Palazzo Cecchini lay between the Rialto and the cusp of land which held the warehouses. One day Carlo was returning from the local grocery store with a big cardboard carton meant for the Dalmatian Rupert to sleep in. Rupert had caught a cold, and Carlo's mother was worried. Carlo spied the rat emerging from between two wooden crates of fish and ice outside a shop.

It was the same rat! Yes! Carlo remembered vividly the two feet cut off, the stabbed eye. Not hesitating more than a second, Carlo slammed the carton upside down on the rat, and sat on the carton. He had him! Carlo sat gently but firmly.

'Hey, Nunzio!' Carlo yelled to a chum who happened to be passing. 'Go call Luigi! Tell him to come! I've caught a rat!'

'A rat!' Nunzio had a fat loaf of bread under his arm. It was after six, getting dark.

'A special rat! Call Luigi!' Carlo yelled more forcefully, because the rat was hurling himself against the sides of the carton and soon he'd start chewing.

Nunzio ran.

Carlo got off the carton and pressed the bottom down hard, and kicked at the sides to discourage the rat from gnawing. His big brother would be impressed, if he could keep the rat till he got here.

'What're you doing there, Carlo, you're in the way!' yelled the fishmonger.

'I gotta rat! You oughta gimme a kilo of scampi for catching one of your rats!'

'My rats?' The fishmonger made a gesture of menace, but was too busy to shoo the boy off.

Luigi came on the run. He had picked up a piece of wood on the way, a square end of a crate. 'A rat?'

'Same rat we had before! The one with the feet off! I swear!'

Luigi grinned, set his hand on the carton and gave its side a good kick. He raised the carton a little at one side, his piece of wood at the ready. The rat darted out, and Luigi came down on its shoulders.

The rat was breathless, and hurt. Another blow fell on his ribs. The rat's legs moved, and he wanted frantically to escape, but he could not get to his feet. He heard the boys' laughter. He was being borne away, in the big carton.

'Let's throw him downstairs! Drown 'im!' said Carlo.

'I want to see him. If we found a cat, we could see a good fight. That black and white cat—'

'She's never around. The water's high. Drown 'im!' The downstairs room fascinated Carlo. He had fantasies of gondolas floating through the door, dumping passengers who would drown in that awful semi-darkness, and finally cover the marble floor with their corpses, which would be seen only when the tide ran out. The ground floor of the Palazzo Cecchini might become another gruesome attraction of Venice, like the dungeons past the Ponte dei Sospiri.

The boys climbed the front steps and entered the Palazzo Cecchini whose tall wooden doors were slightly ajar. Their mama was singing in the kitchen where the transistor played a popular song. Carlo kicked the door shut, and their mother heard it.

'Come and eat, Luigi, Carlo!' she called. 'We're going to the *cine*, don't forget!'

Luigi cursed, then laughed. '*Subito, mama!*'

He and Carlo went down the steps that led to the ground floor.

'You got the carton?' yelled their mother.

'*Si - si!* - Gimme the wood!' Luigi said to his brother. Luigi grabbed the square of wood and tipped the carton at the same time. Luigi remembered the bite on his wrist, and had a particular fear of this rat. The rat tumbled into the water. Yes, it was

the same! Luigi saw the two stumps of his legs. The rat sank at once, and barely felt the clumsy blow that Luigi gave with the edge of the wood.

'Where is he?' asked Carlo. He was ankle-deep in water, standing on the first step, not caring about sandals and socks.

'He'll be up!' Luigi, on the step above, held the wood poised, ready to throw it when he saw the rat surface for air. The boys scanned the dark water that now heaved because of some motor boat that had just passed beyond the door.

'Let's go down! Scare 'im up!' Carlo said, with a glance at his brother, and Carlo at once went down into water up to his knees, and began kicking to make sure the rat didn't come near him.

'Luigi!' their mother shrieked. 'Are you down below? You'll get a beating if you don't come up *now*!'

Luigi twisted around to shout a reply, mouth open, and at that instant saw the rat clumsily climbing the top step into the first floor of the house. 'Mama mia!' he whispered, pointing. 'The rat's gone up!'

Carlo grasped the situation at once, though he didn't see the rat, raised his eyebrows, and silently climbed the steps. They couldn't tell their mother. They'd have to follow the wet trail of the rat and get him out of the house. Both the boys understood this without speaking. When they entered the front hall, the rat had vanished. They peered about for a wet trail, but saw no sign of drops on the grey and white marble floor. Two salon doors were open. The downstairs toilet was ajar. The rat could even have gone upstairs – maybe.

'Are you coming? The spaghetti is on the plates! Hurry!'

'*Sissi, subito, mamma!*' Luigi pointed to Carlo's wet feet, and jerked a thumb to the upstairs, where Carlo's clothing mostly was.

Carlo dashed up the stairs.

Luigi took a quick look in the toilet. They couldn't tell their mother what had happened. She'd never leave the house or let them go to the film tonight, if she knew there was a rat loose. Luigi looked in one of the salons, where six chairs stood around an oval table, where more chairs stood beside wine tables near the walls of the room. He stopped, but still he saw no rat.

Carlo was back. They went down some steps into the kitchen. Papa had nearly finished his spaghetti. Then came bistecca. The plump dog watched with his muzzle on his paws. He salivated. He was tied again to a foot of the tile stove. Luigi looked

around, covertly, for the rat in the corners of the kitchen. Before the meal was over, Maria-Teresa, the baby-sitter, arrived. She had two books under her arm. She smiled broadly, unbuttoned her coat and loosened the scarf that covered her head.

'I am early! I am sorry!' she said.

'No-no! Sit down! Have some torta!'

The dessert was a delicious open-faced pie with peach slices. Who could resist, especially with the appetite of a seventeen-year-old? Maria-Teresa sat and had a slice.

Papa Mangoni had a second piece. Like Rupert he was putting on weight.

Then the family was off, in a hurry, the smallest child in papa's arms, because they'd be four minutes late, by papa's calculations, even if they ran. Papa liked the advertisements that preceded the feature, and he liked saying hello to his chums.

The television set had been moved from the parents' bedroom into the room where the two-month-old Antonio lay as if in state in a cradle high off the ground and covered in white lace which hung nearly to the floor. The cradle was on wheels. Maria-Teresa, humming a song softly, saw that the baby was asleep, and rolled the cradle farther away from the television, which was in a corner, then switched the set on with the volume low. The programme didn't look interesting, so she sat down and opened one of her novels, a love story whose setting was the American West of the last century.

When Maria-Teresa looked at the television screen several minutes later, her eye was caught by a moving grey spot in the corner. She stood up. A rat! A big, horrible looking thing! She moved to the right, hoping to shoo it towards the door on her left, which was open. The rat advanced on her, slowly and steadily. It had one eye only. One of its front feet had been cut off. Maria-Teresa gave a little cry of panic, and ran out of the door herself.

She had no intention of attempting to kill the thing. She hated rats! They were the curse of Venice! Maria-Teresa went at once to the telephone in the downstairs hall. She dialled the number of a bar-café not far away, where her boy friend worked.

'Cesare,' she said. 'I want to speak with Cesare.'

Cesare came on. He heard the story and laughed.

'But can you *come*? The Mangonis went to the cinema. I'm

all alone! I'm so scared I want to run out of the house!

'Okay, I'll come!' Cesare hung up. He swung a napkin over his shoulder, grinning, and said to one of his colleagues, a barman, 'My girl friend's baby-sitting and there's a rat in the house. I'm supposed to go over and kill it!'

'Ha-ha!'

'That's a new one! What time you coming back, Ces?' asked a customer.

More laughter.

Cesare didn't bother telling his boss he was leaving for a few minutes, because the Palazzo Cecchini was one minute away if he trotted. From the pavement outside, Cesare picked up an iron bar four feet long which went across the inside of the door when they closed up. It was heavy. He trotted, and imagined stabbing the bar at a cornered rat, killing it, and imagined the gratitude, the rewarding kisses he would get from Maria-Teresa.

Instead of the door being opened by an anxious girl, his beloved whom he would comfort with a firm embrace, words of courage before he tackled the little beast – instead of this, Cesare was met by a girl crumpled in tears, trembling with terror.

'The rat has eaten the baby!' she said.

'What?'

'Upstairs—'

Cesare ran up with the iron bar. He looked around in the nearly empty, formally furnished room for the rat, looked under a double bed which had a canopy.

Maria-Teresa came in. 'I don't know where the rat is. Look at the baby! We've got to get a doctor! It just happened – while I was telephoning you!'

Cesare looked down at the shockingly red, blood-covered pillow of the baby. All the baby's nose – It was horrible! There *wasn't* any nose! And the cheek! Cesare murmured an invocation of aid from a saint, then turned quickly to Maria-Teresa. 'The baby's *alive*?'

'I don't know! Yes, I think!'

Cesare timidly stuck a forefinger into the baby's curled hand. The baby twitched, gave a snuffling sound, as if he were having trouble breathing through blood. 'Shouldn't we turn him over? Turn him on his side! I'll – I'll telephone. Do you know any doctor's number?'

'No!' said Maria-Teresa who was already imagining concretely the blame she was going to get for letting this happen. She knew she should have fought the rat out of the room instead of telephoning Cesare.

Cesare, after one vain attempt to reach a doctor whose name he knew and whose number he looked up in the telephone book, rang the main hospital of Venice, and they promised to arrive at once. They came via a hospital boat which docked on the Canale Grande some fifty yards away. Cesare and Maria-Teresa even heard the noise of the fast motor. By this time Maria-Teresa had wiped the baby's face gently with a damp face towel, mainly with an idea of facilitating the baby's breathing. The nose was gone, and she could even see a bit of bone there.

Two young men in white gave the baby two injections, and kept murmuring '*Orribile!*' They asked Maria-Teresa to make a hot water bottle.

The blood had gone from Cesare's usually ruddy cheeks, and he felt about to faint. He sat down on one of the formal chairs. Gone was his idea of a passionate embrace with Maria-Teresa. He couldn't even stand on his legs.

The interns took the baby away in the boat, the baby wrapped in a blanket with a hot water bottle.

Cesare recovered a bit of strength, went down to the kitchen and after a search found half a bottle of Strega. He poured two glasses. He was keeping an eye out for the rat, but didn't see it. The Mangonis were due back soon, and he would have preferred to be elsewhere – back at his job – but he reasoned that he ought to stand by Maria-Teresa, and that this excuse would be a good one for his boss. A baby nearly killed, maybe dead now – who knew?

The Mangoni family arrived at 10.40 p.m., and there was instant chaos.

Mama screamed. Everyone talked at once. Mama went up to see the bloody cradle, and screamed again. Papa was told to telephone the hospital. Cesare and the oldest three of the brothers and one of the sisters went on a complete search of the house, armed with empty wine bottles for bashing, knives, a wooden stool from the kitchen, a flat iron, and Cesare had his iron bar. No one saw a rat, but several pieces of furniture received nicks inadvertently.

Maria-Teresa was forgiven. Or was she? Papa could under-

stand her telephoning for help to her boy friend who was near. The hospital reported that the baby had a fifty-fifty chance to live, but could the mother come at once?

The rat had escaped via a square drain in the kitchen wall at floor level. His jump had put him in the Rio San Polo nearly three metres below, but that was no problem. He swam with powerful thrusts of his two good legs, all his legs, plus sheer will power, to the nearest climbing point, and got on to dry land feeling no diminution of his energy. He shook himself. The taste of blood was still in his mouth. He had attacked the baby out of panic, out of fury also, because he hadn't at that point found an exit from the accursed house. The baby's arms and fists had flailed feebly against his head, his ribs. The rat had taken some pleasure in attacking a member of the human race, one with the same smell as the big ones. The morsels of tender flesh had filled his belly somewhat, and he was now deriving energy from them.

He made his way in the darkness with a rolling gait, pausing now and then to sniff at a worthless bit of food, or to get his bearings with an upward glance, with a sniff at the breeze. He was making for the Rialto, where he could cross by means of the arched bridge, pretty safe at night. He thought to make informal headquarters around San Marco, where there were a lot of restaurants in the area. The night was very black, which meant safety for him. His strength seemed to increase as he rolled along, belly nearly touching the dampish stones. He stared at, then sprang at a curious cat which had dared to come close and size him up. The cat leapt a little in the air, then retreated.

Quod erat demonstrandum

I didn't like the look of him even before he asked me about that book. Not that I'm the sort who makes snap judgements on people because of their looks: oh no, that's not me at all. But what you have to understand is that he stared at me in a way that put my back up immediately. It was a full-blown scrutiny, a stare that – how should I put it? – that *dismissed* me; yes, that's the *word* for it! A disparaging glance that told me as nothing else could that I was unworthy of his further interest ... Not the sort of thing calculated to charm any woman at any time, I shouldn't think. So can you wonder that I was upset? All right, so maybe I'm a little more sensitive than I should be in this hard bad world of ours, but that isn't really the point, is it: I mean, it doesn't excuse his behaviour, does it?

Christ, but she was a bloody awful sight!

Not that I'm prejudiced against women, God no; in fact, I love them – when they let me, that is! But seriously: this bird I could not take to, no, sir! For a kick-off she was a bit lengthy in the molars: couldn't be much less than thirty, thirty-two, which – fair's fair – isn't exactly geriatric, I admit; and as it so happens, I've met – and had – some really tremendous females of that age. So it wouldn't have put me off if she'd made some kind of *effort*.

But – dear Lord above us – this piece was something else! The hair like a badly-stacked hayrick; the clobber a kind of yellow tweed, a suit with one of those frumpy three-quarter skirts ... yuk! D'you know, I felt like telling this ratbag, look, with your complexion, Miss, you just don't wear yellow ... Some kind soul should've whispered in her earhole anyhow. And then those bins of hers: now some birds can wear glasses and look good; some, I venture to suggest, look better with them on than otherwise. But this dame had the wrong frames for the wrong shape of face; which, added to the apparent shapeless-

ness of the body under that God-awful frock – Well, no, I felt not a twinge, not even a quiver of desire: which, believe me, is not just unusual, it's extraordinary, for when I'm close to the species female, then hear those hormones howl, man!

I might have excused him his shabby raincoat and his skintight jeans and even the acne across his forehead. I might, too, have forgiven him, in time, for the mute insults he tossed at me through those – I have to say it! – those *hateful* green eyes of his. For after all, I'm not a child, I know my physical limitations; and being perhaps a little more intelligent than average is hardly an adequate compensation for lack of sexual allure ... Look at me, I'm even blushing when I *talk* about it! I honestly believe I would feel better if some fellow stripped me with his eyes, not merely ignored me as this scruffy youth was doing, eyeing me in that insolent manner, as if to say—

But what's the use in my rattling on like this: what I want to put across, I suppose, in fairness to myself, is that I could never have taken to this person whatever his physical attributes or defects, not even if he'd declared his undying devotion to me.

It was the book that put me off. Asking for that book.

Not that there was anything unusual about odd requests for specific volumes. There's a lot of odd folk get in here from time to time: it's only a small local branch, and there isn't exactly a huge selection of books at any one time; but of course there's always this dirty raincoat brigade, asking for all kinds of colourful and assorted lavatorial filth ... And yet even this would have been infinitely preferable to what this young man asked me. At least I'd have understood it if he'd wanted to bring a little pleasure into a life that might be as drab and as empty as my own ... But no: it wasn't a textbook on carnal aberrations he needed ...

Some women shock easily, don't they. Big soft mares, some of them. But Christ, you should've seen the *look* on the bird's features! The way she stared at me, sort of stunned at first, and then all disgusted, like I'd done something unforgivable all over the library counter! And all I said to her – honest to God – was that I wanted a book that described the effect of a missile on a human cranium.

To save her life – no, to save her virginity! – she could not

have withheld that glare of sheer loathing: the way she reared back and grimaced at me and – I mean, God, you'd think women of that age would be more worldly, wouldn't you, aren't I right? Anyway, that's the answer to the big mystery, that's why she handed me the cold shoulder and the marble eye and the frozen mitt and all the other proverbial idiosyncrasies which would probably have improved this dame's looks if they'd ever actually materialized . . . Anyhow, I decided I'd better explain to her exactly why I'm asking for the lousy book in the first place, otherwise I might still be there, waiting for her to recover from her attack of nerves, the unlovely creep—

Well, it shows you can't just go by appearances: a writer, of all things! Who would've dreamed that this callow and unwholesome youth – he must have been all of twenty – who could have guessed that his motives were those of an author, albeit only a potential one. Well, *sure* I was taken aback: if you could have *seen* the man! So he did have some intelligence after all: but of course he would need brains of some description, if only to write a discourse about a cat that sat on a mat. And it staggered me a little to imagine that if he did achieve his object of publishing a book, then said book might – just conceivably – be numbered amongst those on the shelves behind me . . . The mind, if I might filch a cliché, boggles.

It gave me a curious satisfaction to express my regrets to him: to inform him that, sadly, no book in this library contained any such description. I mentioned the main library in the City Centre, but opined that he could hardly expect to find anything there either. He took it badly. It was a setback to him, true: but he took it worse than I had anticipated.

Believe her? Did I bloody hell as like believe her! Rancid old cow! I asked her to check . . . No, I didn't, I bloody well *told* her to check; to look up her catalogues, her lists, her bibliographies, anything. I needed that bit of research for my book, I told her. People *like* detailed description in books.

Check? I had no need to verify my certain knowledge. I mean, good Lord above, I had worked here since leaving school, and I think I've come to know my catalogues pretty well. I think I've developed a reliable memory by now, and the fact remained that

I could not recall any book at any time that illustrated the impact of a heavy object on a person's skull . . . ugh!

Perhaps I became a little ratty with him right then: a wee bit sarcastic too. Even unattractive girls have human instincts. On top of which was the fact that in less than five minutes it would be time to close the library for the day, which in turn meant that I would be walking to the bus-stop in the driving rain that had kept everyone away for most of the afternoon. Everyone but this charmless young boor . . . But his reaction to my lack of cooperation startled me, I admit it.

I was up to *here* with this woman, I can tell you. Enough, I thought. I turned my back on her and started to walk along the corridors of shelves, pulling books out now and again, books that might just have held possibilities, that might just have touched upon the subject matter, however briefly—

As it turned out — they didn't; whereupon I dropped the books on the floor. Childish? Possibly: but I needed an outlet for my feelings. Then of course, the old loon came screaming after me, threatening me, you know the sort of thing, she'd fetch the law, she'd phone the Town Hall, she'd— Well, I stopped listening. I heard her all right, but didn't listen: ignored her completely in fact. Which must have grieved her more than anything else, because when she saw her demands being disregarded, she abandoned all her civilized notions and began to get physical.

Yes, I did hit him, and why not? I was mad; really enraged; and slapping him across the face was at least a temporary balm for my bruised sensibilities . . . He was utterly taken aback, I can tell you. Nothing like resistance could even have occurred to him; and a belt on the cheek would, I believed, bring him to his senses. A librarian has to carry some responsibility, after all; and if hitting the fool was the only way to disabuse him of the idea of wrecking the place, then hitting him is what I had to do.

But even in that moment of wrath, some detached part of me wondered just what his reaction would be, and what he would do next.

I battered her bloody head in. It was partly deliberate and partly a figment of temper. There was this dirty great block of wood

lying on a table just close to my left hand: I think it might have been used for a prop of some description, to support unwieldy shelves, I imagine, though you'd think they'd get the things straight in the first place ... But whatever: it was a heavy wodge of timber, and its weight felt curiously satisfying, as if – ridiculous! – as if it *belonged* there.

Though I say it myself, I gave her a thorough and totally brutal hammering. And a lot of it was probably superfluous, because she was dead long before I stopped hitting her. She lay there, sprawled halfway across a little pile of books at the far end of the shelves, her skull leaking blood by the gallon, her stupid sheep's-eyes glaring at something on the top shelf immediately behind me. And the hidden legs were no longer hidden: they jutted out from that nonsensical skirt like the limbs of a puppet, yet – I was surprised myself – they were quite nice legs really; and why the dense cretin had had to cover them up at all was beyond me ...

Anyway, as I've already pointed out with what I hope is complete candour, only part of the attack on her was due to my temper: because yes, I *did* want the top of her head exposed to view. Maybe this desire was subconscious, but it seems a reasonable assumption: to suppose that if there was no information readily available within the pages of these few hundred volumes around me, then practical experience would seem to be the only other alternative. And when all's said and done, that's the secret of an author's success, wouldn't you think: the art of research. Because it is an art, you know: the dissection of ideas, the analysis of basic subject matter, the very anatomy of whichever concept it is that hums and thrums and throbs within the mind.

I don't want to give the impression that I'm a lazy sod: I did in fact do a spot of studying prior to visiting that crummy library. I'd found a book that detailed in minute narrative the various segments of the skull and the brain: the only thing it didn't do was to provide the knowledge I had originally sought – the results of a concerted and prolonged and lethal attack on the cranium. Which brings us back to the late and surely unlamented library lady, the unattractive deadie who lay horizontally across from me ... I had come to investigate the various phenomena associated with the fragmenting of the skull, and time was slipping by.

It was an uncanny and strangely beautiful experience to gaze

– I admit it! – in rapt and almost childish wonder at the interior of this woman's head, armed as I was with the knowledge gleaned from my initial studies. There was this odd sense of unreality: I was looking along a cross-section of an actual female cranium ... Correction: the fragmented segments of what had once been a cranium.

But amidst the carnage, I could detect what had formed the frontal bone and – what was this? – the parietal bone further back, at the base of the head; and there – see! – the occipital bone that jutted out above the base of the neck ... I shoved my questing hand into the gaping maw of the woman's head, shifting chunks of bone aside; I was almost breathless with pleasure; I was utterly, totally absorbed. I felt as the first man on the Moon must have felt, venturing into an area hitherto undreamed-of, a world of strange charm and infinite mystery. But there was more. Much more. The skull was the hors d'oeuvre. I probed further, my wrists steeped in blood. And there it was, shredded but recognizable. Her brain.

The textbook blurb came back to me in gratifying clarity: 'The cerebrum – the main part of the human brain – consists of two large and ovoid convoluted masses called cerebral hemispheres, and each of these latter contains a cavity known as a lateral ventricle ...' I don't know who the author is or was, but he couldn't make the subject dry for me even if he wanted to. The sight and touch of this gorgeous brain brought the whole topic to instantaneous life ... The cerebrum: two egg-shaped blobs that looked as if they were composed of an outer layer of grey matter, which I had smithereened into dollops of what appeared to be an off-white oozing pus—

'Cortex.' I said it aloud. I was pleased with myself, gratified that I had recalled the name of this seeping dirtyish slime. I frowned: there was another name or two, and it suddenly seemed important that I remembered ... I dug my fingers into the morass of diced bone and leaden syrup, shifting the various pulped contents about until – 'Medullary substance.' I had to laugh then, a sort of gleeful giggle. The central core of the brain: this trickling whiteness in which were embedded the basal nuclei of the brain; I let my fingers float in the near-liquefied cavity of the skull, aware of a feeling of almost sexual intensity, aware that I had taken my research to lengths which even I had never envisaged.

The block of timber had done its work well: the head was a yawning crevasse that yielded all the detailed information any writer could crave for, that portrayed in stark detail each and every aspect of how and why a person moves and has his being . . . The dead eyes stared at me from the front of the splintered skull, as I washed my hands in the reservoir of gore and bone and brain which formed the librarian's head.

Which brings me to the present. I stand here beside the corpse, scribbling my notes, on the basis of which my story will come to fruition.

The library door is still open; and suddenly there is noise behind me. People running, people shouting, people screaming. Screaming . . .

But I shall not turn round. For what can be worse for a budding scribe than - distraction?

Jane Gregory

Belvedere's bride

She was eighteen, and had been blind from birth. Belvedere was much older, probably fifty, although he was deliberately vague about his precise age.

He and his late sister, the sadly missed Trippita, had adopted the girl when she was only a few weeks old and lavished on her all the love and devotion that even *real* parents would have found difficult to match. Since the death of his sister, a year previously, Belvedere had managed to keep the home going more or less normally. He ironed the clothes and cooked the meals, cleaned the house and fed the cat. His adopted daughter, Clare, was not allowed to help with any of the heavy duties for in addition to her blindness the poor child was – well – different.

Belvedere watched her grow through infancy and adolescence and now she was on the threshold of womanhood. She was a cheerful, intelligent girl and spent hours with her touch-tapestry – a present from Belvedere – and her rather grand Italian mouth organ.

The house in which they lived was perched on a cliffside overlooking one of Cornwall's most isolated beaches. Even in summer a raw wind cut into the bay whipping the sea into a cream on the blue-grey rocks that guarded the beach like a row of broken fangs.

Belvedere was a marine biologist and worked largely at home, the beach providing raw material for his research and his scholarly articles which were published in dozens of scientific journals throughout the world. Clare never left the house – except with Belvedere, and then early in the morning for a brief constitutional along the rocky beach. If ever Belvedere was required to travel – a thing he hated – he locked Clare in her own room – which had every comfort of course, including a bath – and there she remained until his return.

After one such trip Belvedere arrived home to discover Clare

in a great state of excitement; she was pounding on her bedroom door and calling his name loudly. Belvedere hurried upstairs and unlocked the door, fearful lest she had injured herself or fallen ill. To his surprise, however, she almost knocked him flat with an exuberant hug.

'What is it, child?' he gasped, unwinding her arms from his neck.

'It's happened – it's actually happened!' she cried. 'Only for a moment, but – oh I'm so *happy*.' With that the girl collapsed, weeping, at his feet.

Belvedere helped her to a chair and waited for the sobs to subside. 'Now, Clare,' he said softly, 'tell me what happened and speak slowly so that I can understand.'

The girl took a deep breath, as if gathering herself for a supreme effort. 'This morning,' she whispered, 'while I was working on my tapestry, I actually *saw* my hands – I *saw* them – so strange—' her voice trailed off and she began weeping again.

Belvedere's heart missed a beat. Sigh! After eighteen years' blindness – an incredible phenomenon.

'Now listen to me, Clare,' he said kindly, 'it may well be a miracle – *but* we mustn't hope for too much. It could be – well, a temporary thing – or nothing at all – it would be cruel to pin your hopes—'

'But I *saw*,' she said, interrupting him, 'I tell you I *saw*.'

Belvedere patted her arm. 'Yes, child, I believe you. But we must be calm and patient. You're tired now – I suggest you try to sleep. I'll have Dr Morgan examine you in the morning.'

The girl protested lamely but Belvedere was adamant. A hot cup of tea, a biscuit and then sleep – that was all he was going to allow for *this* evening. Later, when Clare was indeed asleep, he telephoned the doctor and told him of her experience.

The aged medico was full of excitement and Belvedere had difficulty in persuading him to wait until morning before making his examination. At last he relented when Belvedere explained that the girl had taken a sleeping tablet and shouldn't be disturbed. For Belvedere, however, sleep was impossible; he paced the rooms of the huge mansion, smoking cigars and fortifying himself with endless cups of coffee.

As dawn broke over the deserted beach he showered and shaved with meticulous care and changed into a monogrammed silk shirt. Then he perfumed and combed his hair, taking great

pains to disguise the greying strands which grew at his temples. If Clare was to see him for the first time the very least he could do was to make himself presentable.

Dr Morgan's black Austin scrunched into the gravel drive at nine o'clock precisely. Clare, whose momentary vision had not returned, was sulking in the library with the braille edition of *Wuthering Heights*.

Belvedere admitted the doctor courteously, looking up at the figure that towered so tall above him. Dr Morgan, thin and gangling, politely refused coffee and insisted that he examine Clare immediately. After an hour he had shone torches in the girl's eyes, raised her lids with a soft probe, made her roll her eyeballs from side to side and subjected her to a torrent of slippery, faintly astringent drops.

'I have no wish to raise your hopes falsely,' he pronounced, replacing his instruments carefully in their case. 'But I do detect a *real* improvement. There is considerable mobility of the pupil, and a great deal of nerve activity. Of course, she must see an eye specialist as soon as it can be arranged. This will mean travelling to London.'

Belvedere touched the doctor's arm. 'No,' he said firmly. 'If Clare needs a specialist, he must come here – I will not permit it otherwise.'

Dr Morgan opened his mouth to protest but thought better of it when he observed the determined set of Belvedere's face. Later, when Clare was in the library again, Dr Morgan took a glass of sherry with Belvedere.

'If her sight is to be restored,' said the doctor cautiously, 'I imagine you will have to explain certain things – certain *delicate* things to Clare – if you follow me.'

Belvedere lit his Havana cigar with a flourish and blew a plume of smoke in the air. 'I am aware of my duty, Doctor,' he said firmly. 'I shall not shrink it, she will be told.'

Dr Morgan toyed with his glass and Belvedere recharged it. 'I have plans for Clare, Doctor,' he continued, 'long-term plans.'

'Oh?' said the doctor, his curiosity aroused.

'Yes,' said Belvedere. 'I intend to marry her.'

Dr Morgan almost dropped his glass and his face took on a crumpled, lugubrious expression.

'But my dear Belvedere – forgive me speaking frankly, but marriage – well, I mean, how can you? The girl's your – well, your *adopted* child.'

'Then it's perfectly *legal*,' snapped Belvedere. 'It's not incest, you know – not when there are no ties of blood.'

Dr Morgan's cheeks flushed slightly; he stood up. 'I'm sorry, Belvedere,' he said, 'it was churlish of me to comment in the way I did. Please forgive me. You have of course given Clare a lifetime of devotion. I'm sure what you propose is for the best.'

'But of course,' said Belvedere, mollified. 'No offence given – no offence taken. More sherry?'

Dr Morgan declined, and was shown cordially off the premises, Belvedere eliciting from him a promise that any eye specialist would come to them, and not vice versa.

In the days that followed, Clare found her vision recurring in short, irregular spasms – a succession of faint images, planes of light, and fleeting liquid objects. Belvedere decided to delay contacting Dr Morgan, making excuses to Clare about the old man's busy schedule. After two weeks events came to a head. It was late evening and the moon had vanished behind a layer of brooding cloud. Clare was playing her mouth organ in the library while Belvedere completed work on a biological thesis for an American magazine.

Suddenly he heard the girl cry out. It was a cry of joy – an eruption of ecstatic excitement. As he hurried across the great hall to the library her cries became louder.

'I can see,' she was shouting, 'I can see everything.'

Belvedere sprang into the library and she looked straight at him – her eyes brimming with tears.

'Clare,' he said softly.

She rushed to him and flung her arms around him, her body trembling. He led her gently to the sofa and they sat down. Belvedere was weeping too. He took her hand in his and held it gently.

'It is a miracle,' he said. 'We must pray to God and thank him for this miracle, Clare, but first I must explain – it cannot wait. Now you can see – see everything – you must also *know*.'

'Know *what*?' said Clare, her mind a vivid theatre of sensation. Her eyes swept greedily over every object in the room and then back to Belvedere. Her joy was beyond description.

'Look at your hands, Clare,' said Belvedere quietly, 'look at them.'

She did as he asked, not comprehending the reason.

'I must tell you, Clare,' he continued, 'that you are not as others are. You are – *different* – see how your hands compare with mine. See how different they are, and come, child, look at your reflection in the mirror, standing next to mine. See how—'

He helped her gently to her feet and they gazed into the big carved mirror that hung on the library wall. Clare's hand shot up to cover her face when she saw its image. Belvedere embraced her gently.

'So, my child, you understand – you *see* the *difference* – you know now why I can never let you leave this house – never let you be tortured by the mocking gaze of – normal people. I will protect you – *always*, for ever. You will be my *wife*, Clare. I shall never let anything harm you, *ever*. Now come, child, don't despair. You can see the house, you can see the cliffs, the sea, you can make your new world *here*, *safely* with me.'

The girl clung to him fiercely. 'Oh thank you,' she sobbed. 'Don't let anyone *see* me except you. *Please*. Please.'

'There, there,' said Belvedere, 'nobody will. Not even old Dr Morgan again. We're done with doctors. We don't need them, do we? Come on, my little Clare, let's walk on to the beach, it's empty now and you will be able to see the waves and the rocks and the sand.'

Holding her gently, he led her towards the french windows and she clung to him, happy again, secure in his love, yet ashamed of how *different* she was.

Belvedere was happy too. He had already decided to lie to Dr Morgan and tell him that Clare's sight had not returned and that his services would no longer be required. As for the wedding? Well, Belvedere would conduct the service himself and there would just be the two of them – he and Clare.

On the left of the beach, just above the house, was a jagged promontory of rock, the haunt of gulls and other sea birds. As Belvedere led Clare down the stone steps to the bay he failed to observe the small figure watching them from the crag. It was a boy, no more than sixteen, risking his neck for a gull's egg which he hoped he could locate in one of the rocky crevices.

As the lad raised his head he saw Belvedere and Clare directly below him, a curious and fascinating duo. The girl was ex-

quisite, a honey blonde with the face of a goddess and a slender yet voluptuous figure. Perfect legs showed clearly through the flimsy fabric of her dress. She was clinging to the arm of a monster. A misshapen brute with a gargoyle's face and coarse mottled skin. His hands were hideously disfigured with warts and matted hair and he dragged his bloated, dwarfish body on bowed and stunted legs. Strangely enough, the girl seemed happy and as they stepped on to the beach she stooped and kissed her dreadful companion on the lips.

Myc Harrison

The coffin flies

Prologue

At 9.35 on the evening of Friday, January 10th in the year 1792, a young mill worker named Emma Watson left the Waterton General Flour Mill and headed for home across the fields towards the village of Maltby, a little more than a mile and a half away. The owner of the Mill had found her huddled beside a sack of flour, shivering with cold, and had taken compassion on her. He'd sent her home several hours earlier than her shift was due to finish. She'd caught cold several days before and her breathing sounded harsh and painful as she hurried through the night, wrapping her thin cotton coat around her body and following the well-worn footpath that led down through the meadows and into the dark wooded copse where a man with an axe was quietly waiting.

He stood in the shadows of an old oak tree that towered above him into the wintry sky. The axe rested against his leg with the blade against the cold roots of the tree.

The ground was hard and frosty and snow lay across the furrowed fields like a threadbare sheet. Dark clouds filled with grey snow moved across the sky, casting long moon-shadows that rolled over the frozen landscape. Emma Watson stumbled over the rough footpath but soon regained her balance. She ducked involuntarily as a small colony of vesper bats passed overhead. She loathed their brown leathery bodies and shuddered when she heard the wind tremble in their wings. She hurried on into the darkness ahead.

The man by the tree wore a long dark overcoat that almost reached the ground. He pushed his hands inside the big deep pockets for the cold wind had chilled him as it rose up through the narrow valley below.

The wind was icy cold out in the meadow and it stung the girl's eyes and made them water. She kept her head down and ran sideways into the wind. Her hair was soft and thin, a blonde

veil of silk that contoured the shape of her head and fanned out behind her like a young child's. White plumes of warm breath streamed from her mouth and her feet made tiny sounds along the footpath as she ran lightly downhill towards the man with the cold steel axe.

He felt the shaft of the axe against his leg and took his hand from his coat pocket and rubbed the smooth wood back and forth. It felt solid and reliable.

She finally reached the rough wooden stile where the meadow and the copse met in eerie silence. Her foot scraped the frosted step as she climbed over slowly. She thought of little else but the pain in her chest and the comforting warmth of her narrow bed that awaited her. She stepped down the far side and pulled the cotton coat tightly round her thin body before she moved on into the deepening darkness of the small wood.

He heard a sound, a thin scratching sound that came from the direction of the open meadow, and he moved back into the blackness beside the tree. He took his other hand from his pocket and held the axe lightly across his body. He was hardly breathing at all.

She tried to hurry through the woods but the pain in her chest slowed her down. She slid her hand beneath her coat and dress and pressed her knuckles against the tightness that seemed to grip her lungs. Almost without thinking, she cast a sudden glance over her shoulder.

He leapt forward round the tree and saw a small figure of a young woman coming down the pathway towards him.

She stopped on the pathway, bent forward in a fit of coughing. The tears in her eye blurred her vision and she wiped them away on the sleeve of her coat. She began to walk forward once again, shuffling her feet over the uneven ground.

He heard the sounds of her feet scuffing the cold earth as he lifted the axe high and laid it across his shoulder. His hands were numb from holding the shaft.

She looked around once again, quickening her pace for the woods were too quiet and it made her feel uneasy. She came almost level with the old oak tree then saw the white cloud of his breath as he stepped forward on to the footpath, raising the terrible axe high in the air. It cleaved an invisible gash through the darkness and she tried to scream but the cold steel blade of the axe reached her first. It struck her a sickening blow that

sank deep within her skull and she felt the soft split of flesh and the splintering of bone as the metal blade buried itself amid her last thoughts of pain and fear, amid her dreams and emotions, her hopes and fears. It exploded the compartments of her life in one sudden burning flash of dreadful impact.

She folded like a rag-doll and slid to the ground devoid of life. The axe protruded from the terrible wound and something began to bubble audibly around the edges of the cold steel blade. It ran out from the edges of the wide split in her skull and filled the soft pink skin of her ear, trickling down like a dull red waterfall to form a spreading stain on the ground beneath her head.

The man leant over her body and jerked the axe free in one swift move. Her head bounced as the blade slid smoothly free of the wound. There was a sudden rush of blood flecked with chips of white bone.

He pulled a tightly wadded canvas bag from his pocket and shook it open, pushing his hand deep inside to press out the corners. He knelt down and fitted the canvas bag over the dead girl's head, pulling it quickly over the wound until it reached the thin white flesh of her neck. He wrapped a length of twine around the neck of the bag, pulling it tightly around the girl's neck to contain the flow of blood that gurgled whenever he moved her head. He tied a series of knots in the twine and stood back, satisfied. The girl's body seemed more grotesque now, with the black, waterproof hood covering her head. Stray strands of thin blonde hair escaped from beneath the hood, fluttering at the nape of her neck in the chill winter wind.

He tucked the bloodied axe beneath his arm and scooped up the limp body of Emma Watson and jostled her over his shoulder. Without even a backward glance, he set off through the trees, heading across the copse and into the series of furrowed fields that lay beyond. He could feel the dying warmth of her frail body against his neck as he strode across the frozen landscape.

There was less cloud across the face of the moon and he hurried on towards the dark shadows of a long hedge that bordered the field he was in. He heard the soft feathery rustle of a barn owl in flight when it suddenly swooped down close by him, picking off the black shadow of a field mouse that stood out, stark and obvious against the white background of powdery

snow. The field mouse squealed once as the owl soared upwards into the night.

He reached his destination finally and sank down beside the deep hole that was to be her grave. He slid her cold body from his shoulder and let her rest atop the the huge pile of brown dirt that he'd dug from the grave. He rested awhile before turning her over, face up, and began undressing her with numb, fumbling fingers. He heaped her clothes at the head of the grave beside the axe until she was completely naked. The moon shone on the white waxy surface of her body and he paused a moment longer, catching the clean soap smell of her young body before climbing over her and down into the dank, deep grave.

There was a lantern resting in the corner of the hole and he lit it carefully. He lifted it up and placed it outside the grave then reached over and took hold of her, dragging her over the edge and lifting her gently down to rest at his feet. Loose dirt poured down into the grave, making a series of thudding sounds as it hit the bottom. Her head was bent back and a crust of brown dried blood showed around her neck where the hood ended. He lifted the lantern back down and propped her body sideways against one wall of the grave. He held her in place with one hand whilst he scooped the loose dirt in behind her until the dirt was high enough to keep her pressed firmly against the grave wall. He climbed out.

The pointed spade lay on the far side of the mound of dirt and he picked it up, feeling the swollen blisters across his hands from when he'd dug the grave earlier that day. He thrust the pointed blade into the mound of earth and carefully lowered it as far as he could into the grave before tipping it sideways and letting the dirt pile up alongside the body. He soon filled the narrow trench beside her body and climbed down to retrieve the dusty lantern. He made a final adjustment to ensure that her body was pressed hard against the side of the grave, lying sideways in her final resting place. He stepped out and quickly shovelled the rest of the earth into the grave, stamping it flat when his task was finally completed. He brushed handfuls of loose snow across the fresh packed earth to conceal his crime and picked up her clothes, together with the axe and shovel. He carried the lantern ahead of him and walked away from the fresh grave that was safely hidden beneath the snow.

It was almost midnight when he arrived home, tired and cold

from his long ordeal. He bolted the front door behind him and walked quickly through the empty house to a door set beneath the wide staircase. He passed his hand against a dark panel of wood and the door wainscoting seemed to grunt as the door swung inwards on oiled hinges. He stepped through the door and descended a narrow flight of concrete steps that led down to a labyrinth of passageways and dusty cellars beneath the big house. He held the lantern high and made his way to the front of the house. He stepped into a cluttered cellar room at the head of a long passage and hung the lantern on a nail near the doorway.

The room was full of broken furniture and discarded boxes that were heaped in a corner beside an old iron stove. There was a window set high in one wall and a layer of snow was visible where the window and the ground above met. He dragged a broken chair across the floor and placed it beneath the window, then balanced himself carefully across the sagging upholstered seat and pulled the thick heavy curtain across the narrow window, shutting himself off from the rest of the world.

He hastily built a fire on to which he threw the dead girl's clothes, poking at the embers within the stove until every last shred had been consumed. He cleaned off the axe and the shovel and returned them to their rightful place on his way back through the cellars, back up to the main floor of the house.

He checked the time by the tall grandfather clock down the hall and walked slowly down to the back kitchen and prepared himself a hearty supper.

Before he lit his pipe, he checked the time once more and considered going back down into the cellars but decided to bide his time. He felt content for the time being and enjoyed the feeling of a full belly as he languished in his favourite chair, pulling on his pipe. He closed his eyes but he didn't sleep for he was thinking.

Not of the murder he'd just committed but of the events that were about to take place downstairs in the cellar at the back of the house.

The overnight stage from London to York had taken on a team of fresh horses, the third change since leaving the capital at noon the previous day. There were but three passengers remain-

ing on board the coach and they were all tired and travel-weary from the constant jolting of the coach over the hard frozen ruts in the road. The fresh team lunged forward into the night as the coachman let them have their head across the high ground of the wild open moors.

Nostrils flared against the headwind and the long matted hair of their manes danced swiftly between the slack reins that trailed across their powerful necks as the team plunged down a sharp dip and rose effortlessly up the far side. The coachman rocked back and forth, bundled up against the cold sharp air of night. The feeling of speed and the thunder of hooves across the heather made the ride an exhilarating experience and the coachman leant forward, yelling at his team, urging them on, faster and faster as the night slipped past in a blur of moonlit shadows.

The coach bounced and bucked across the springy turf as the team cut corners, saving long minutes on the final run up to York. The coachman was concerned about little else save the bonus he would earn by arriving ahead of time. Such was his concern that he almost missed the turning off to Maltby. The signpost flashed by and too late he remembered, bringing the powerful team back down from a full gallop to a gentle trot and a final stop, setting the coach springs creaking.

He clambered down from the coach and walked round the side to the door. He pulled it open and peered into the darkened interior. 'Maltby?' he queried.

There was a stirring from the far corner and a dark figure shuffled forward, bent double at the waist. The coachman stood back as a young man stepped down from the coach. The man stretched tentatively, as though unsure his body would take the strain. He looked around at the dark trees and lonely fields that reached out across the moors.

'Are we there, then?' he asked the coachman.

'Aye,' the other nodded. 'Maltby's just back there a piece. You can't miss it. Turn right at the signpost.'

'Oh.' The young man stood uncertain, frowning back down the road. 'I thought you went right into Maltby,' he said.

'Can't,' the coachman lied. 'Road's too narrow. Can't get the horses turned round.' He lifted the young man's suitcase from the luggage space at the rear of the coach and set it down in the

middle of the road. 'Hope you had a pleasant ride, sir,' the man leered, touching his forehead with one hand whilst holding out the other for a tip.

The young man fumbled through his pockets in the darkness, knowing he had little money to spare and unsure of how much the man expected by way of a tip. He wasn't a frequent traveller by coach and was unsure of the amount. He fetched a coin from his pocket and pressed it into the coachman's outstretched hand. The coachman peered at it in disgust and thrust his hand into his pocket with a grunt of disapproval. He climbed swiftly back up to his seat on the coach and cracked the riding whip loudly over the heads of the leading horses. The coach lurched forward, sending a spray of loose dirt from beneath the wheels. The man watched it for a few moments until it was swallowed up in the darkness.

He collected his suitcase, a rather shoddy affair made of brown cardboard and held together with string that trailed along the path behind him as he set off back down the rutted roadway towards the village of Maltby.

The weather was cruel and he hurried down the cobbled high street looking for directions to Maltby Manor. He passed a row of shops, their rounded bay windows in total darkness. A row of stone cottages stood back from the road and he could see the insignia stone beneath the roof which read 'Waterton Flour Mill Cottages 1745' and beneath it the sheaves of wheat immortalized in stone. A lantern hung brightly in one of the windows and he heard a woman crying loudly as he passed. Other voices interrupted her, some soothing, some raised in anger or concern. He hurried past, not wishing to keep his host waiting any longer than necessary.

In his haste he almost missed the quick movement of a curtain inside the last of the cottages and the slow, careful appraisal as a pair of eyes slid over him, watching him take the narrow pathway leading uphill to Maltby Manor. He cast a quick look behind him in time to see the curtain close.

The going was hard and steep and he rested several times to catch his breath. The path was flecked with snow and ice which made the going even more arduous. It was close to two o'clock in the morning when he finally arrived at the front door of the Manor. He rested his case on the step and lifted the heavy knocker, carved in the shape of a two-headed serpent.

He heard the thin high voice from within and called back, asking for Professor Garron and identifying himself as Martin Ashley. The door creaked open and a shaft of yellow light fell across the step. A lantern held high lit the doorway and the thin voice bade him enter. He picked up his case and stepped inside.

'So,' the voice went on, 'you're Ashley?'

'Yes,' the young man replied, unsure as to whom he was speaking, 'yes, sir,' he added.

'I knew your father, of course,' the thin voice said. 'Many years ago.'

The two men stood in silence for a few seconds, staring at one another in the yellow light of the lantern. Finally, the older man motioned his guest forward and held his arm lightly just above the elbow. 'I'm in the library,' he said, identifying himself as the Professor whom Martin Ashley had come to see. 'Come along, I think you'll find it comfortable. I have a fire going.'

They moved through the darkness in a pool of yellow light. The passageways were long and the corners narrow and the two men shuffled along side by side. When they finally reached the library Martin found it was indeed comfortable for there was a big log fire burning in the recessed fireplace, the logs of silver birch crackling pleasantly. Orange and yellow flames danced up the chimney and the heat from the fire soon thawed the newcomer and he removed his overcoat and threw it across the back of his chair.

'Well, I trust you had an uneventful journey, Ashley,' the older man remarked. 'Tis a long way to travel up from London town.' He hesitated a few moments before speaking again. 'I can assume you told no one of your plans to visit Maltby, can I not?'

Ashley nodded. He'd received the invitation to spend a few days with the Professor on the premise that he kept it strictly confidential. He was tempted to boast of his unexpected invitation to several of his friends and fellow students at his University but he had fought the urge.

Professor Garron was something of a legend among the students for he was considered brilliant by many of his peers and quite the reverse by many others. He had spent several years in Paris assisting Frederick Mesmer, the Austrian physician who claimed to have discovered a magnetic fluid that supposedly flowed between himself and his patients. Garron became

totally absorbed in the notion of magnetic fluid, though he strongly disagreed with Mesmer's terminology of the phenomenon. What Mesmer had founded, of course, was the science of hypnosis.

Garron returned to London where he spent almost five years on research, only to conclude that Mesmer's magnetic fluid was nothing short of fraudulent. The discovery almost shattered Garron, who had so firmly believed in it, and he threw himself into anatomy and biology and even rekindled the dying fires of alchemy in his continual search for the key to the Universe. It was during the latter part of his time in London that he stumbled across the single, most gruesome mystery of life that was to eventually drive him out of the city to take refuge in the lonely exile of the Yorkshire moors where he began his research behind the grey walls of Maltby Manor.

His research had also cut him off from his fellow man and the years slipped quietly by until one day he learnt of Martin Ashley's interest in the same mystery of life. It was quite by accident that he happened to pick up an outdated journal that had been sent to him several months before. It was a science paper that carried essays by students and their professors and it was badly reproduced to say the least. Garron had no use for it, though a kindly old friend had sent it because that friend had written one of the essays concerning the effects of the stars in relation to the planetary system. Garron was about to tear it up to kindle the fire in his library when he noticed a single word that seemed to jump from the page. He sat down and folded the magazine back to read the essay by Martin Ashley and the word 'phoridae' was repeated several times. It referred to the family of insects that encompassed the incredible and mysterious coffin fly.

Professor Garron had first encountered this species many years earlier in London during the exhumation of a coffin that had been buried beneath the earth for close on three years. His interest in the case was purely academic and he had travelled across to Paddington to witness the opening of the coffin. It was actually opened in the morgue, a brown oblong room beneath the hospital that stank of dead flesh and dried human remains. The coffin was made of oak and had been sealed before it was committed to the earth. The seal broke with an inward rush of air and the coffin lid was raised to reveal thousands, perhaps

even millions of tiny hump-backed flies that scuttled back and forth across the bleached skeleton within the box.

The puzzle was how the flies ever got inside the box in the first place. After the skeleton and the flies had been removed, Garron studied the coffin in minute detail and concluded that it was impossible for them to have gained entry after the coffin had been sealed. If such an item could be described as beautifully made, then that coffin surely deserved such praise. The oak was thick and strong and the joints were made by craftsmen. Yet, if the flies were there when the coffin was sealed, they had maintained themselves through many generations, even increasing their numbers tens of thousands of times.

Garron launched himself into the world of the coffin fly. His colleagues found his interest macabre and foolish; he was exiled from their ranks and eventually he turned his back on the City in favour of the solitude of the Manor.

Reading Ashley's essay on the species of fly known as phoridae or coffin fly had excited Garron, for here was a young student who had also chanced upon the single most baffling mystery of life. Garron sent an immediate request to Martin at the London university that he be his guest for a few days at Maltby Manor. The reason for his insistence on secrecy will become apparent.

Professor Garron had known Martin Ashley's father many years earlier and had, in fact, worked with him for several months on an alchemy project that came to a sudden end when a burner they were using overheated and almost blew up.

The two men sat before the fire and drank from a jug of sour ale. Young Martin Ashley was much mystified as to why the Professor had invited him to stay over at the house. It surely wasn't to discuss his father – after all, the two men hadn't known each other that well or for that long. Martin let his curiosity be overruled and let the warmth of the fire and the strength of the ale relax him. They made small talk and Garron hinted of great things, great advances he was making in certain directions without clarifying matters.

It became increasingly difficult for Martin to remain awake and the old Professor soon realized that his guest was nearly asleep.

'Here,' he said, rising from his armchair. 'Come and sleep on the chesterfield. There's some blankets and things at the end

there.' He waved an arm at the pile of blankets. 'I'll leave the fire as it is for you. You'll probably need it.'

They said their good-nights and Martin was fast asleep before Professor Garron had closed the library door behind him. He listened at the door for a few moments before heading off down the darkened corridors to the concealed door that led down to the cellars beneath the house. He lit the lantern and followed the labyrinth of passageways that led through the dusty cellars to the back of the house. His heart was racing as he reached the end of the passage and unlocked the heavy door. It creaked a little as he pushed it open and stepped into the cellar beyond. He closed it tightly behind him and only then did he admire his handiwork.

It was late, well past midday, when Martin woke up. For a few seconds he could not remember where he was and glanced around the library in wonder. The air was chill and he pulled the thin blankets around himself, tucking the edges in beneath his body. A mountain of dead cold ashes lay across the fireplace and a light grey dust seemed to hover in the air. He pulled the blankets higher and slept a little longer but finally gave in to hunger and the call of nature.

The Professor greeted him warmly and offered him lunch, for it was well past the breakfast hour. They sat down in the library, which seemed strange to Martin for the house was very large and obviously there were many other rooms. Garron explained.

'I live alone,' he said. 'I cannot afford a woman to cook or clean for me and so I live in just three rooms. This one, my kitchen and my bedroom. I know the house is far too big for my needs but it does provide me with the privacy I need for my research, you see.'

Martin nodded. 'What might that research be, Professor Garron?'

The Professor pursed his lips and leant forward in his chair. His head was bent forward and he stared at Martin from beneath thick eyebrows that met in the middle. Thick strands of grey hair curled and mingled with the darker colouring of his brows which seemed to add to his sudden air of seriousness. 'My research is something very dear to my heart, Martin, for in it I feel I have found a secret, a mystery that still baffles me after all

these years of study.' He paused, but not for the effect such a pause might have for he was in a world of his own like a man reviewing his past. 'It all began in a long brown room beneath the hospital in Paddington.

'I'd managed to station myself next to a coffin that was being opened, having been taken from the ground after almost three years. When the lid of the coffin was prised open it revealed a most horrendous sight. There were thousands upon thousands of tiny insects, flies with humped-backs that scuttled back and forth beneath the glow of the lanterns. Some of these insects had wings, though they seemed reluctant to fly more than a few inches if at all. The morgue attendant told me they were a common enough sight and that he'd seen them in almost every coffin that had ever been opened after exhumation.

'I could not understand where they came from. I spent a great deal of my time thinking of those creatures until I finally could think of nothing else. I have devoted the past eight years of my life to making a study of them, Martin. A study which you yourself have already begun. That is why I invited you here, Martin, to hear from you about your own success. Perhaps we can work together.'

Martin was obviously flattered that the Professor should think him worthy enough to work with him on a project such as this. He also understood now how and why the Professor had singled him out. It must have been the essay he wrote for the science journal. He felt a little guilty in that regard because the essay had merely been the result of a single week's investigation, not the results of a lifetime of study. He had simply conducted an experiment, written it up and promptly forgot about it. It seemed strange to think of it haunting him now. His interest had been more a question of classification rather than an attempt to trace the origins of the grisly creatures.

'You see,' Garron continued, 'I read your essay. In fact, I have it right here with me.' He held it up as if Martin needed proof. 'It was excellent. Truly excellent.'

Martin thanked him, and the praise for his essay reminded him of the week he spent working on it. He'd heard of the coffin fly before that, of course, though he could not recall exactly where he'd heard of it. The two men spent much of the afternoon discussing the fly and Martin elaborated on his essay whilst Professor Garron listened intently.

'I used a small dog from the laboratory for my initial experiment and had it killed under the most hygienic of conditions. This was to ensure that the fly was unable to get to the carcass until I was ready for that moment. The dog was kept in the laboratory for four days before I took it out and buried it. I'd dug a hole exactly thirty inches deep and I put the dog in the hole and covered it over with the same dirt that I'd taken from the hole.

'Then I set up a round-the-clock watch on the area around the grave. I used a fellow named Marlow to take turns watching the ground and indeed it was Marlow who first noticed the coffin fly that wormed its way up through the soil. He sent for me immediately and had the little insect trapped beneath a glass bell-jar. Then more of them began breaking through the surface, popping up into the daylight and stumbling about as though they were blinded. We made quite a collection of them and were able to classify them as belonging to the phoridae family. We tried to keep them but they all died.

'Later, when we dug up the carcass of the dog, we noticed it was alive with coffin flies. They follow the order of the higher flies, I forget the term now.'

'Cyclorrhapha,' Garron said. 'The higher order of insect flies lay larvae in the form of maggots.'

'Yes, there were thousands of maggots feeding on the decaying flesh of the dog. It was quite repulsive.'

'Did you not realize that decaying flesh is the only known food of the coffin fly larva?'

Martin was silent for a moment. Garron had become so intense these past few minutes it unnerved him. 'No,' he said. 'No, I wasn't aware that it was their only source of food.'

'Well, that's understandable,' Garron smiled. 'After all, I've spent many more years investigating them than you have been able to put in. Yes, it's quite understandable.'

There seemed to be an uneasy silence between them. Martin glanced across the room through the window and was surprised to see how dark it was outside. He stood up and went to peer through the window when he saw the face of a man pressed against the glass. Martin jumped and a gasp escaped him. He pointed at the window and the Professor turned and stared at the man.

'What are you doing!' Garron exploded. 'Get away from

there.' He turned and threw the library door open and strode off down the corridors to the front of the house. The man at the window moved away and also headed for the front of the house.

'What are you after?' Garron demanded, 'Explain yourself. Why are you on my property?'

'We're looking for a girl.' The man was surly in his approach. 'Emma Watson. She lives down in the village.'

'Well, there's no girl here,' Garron snapped.

'Could be she's dead already,' the man said. 'Whole village has been out looking for her. Someone found a lot of blood over by the old copse. Reckon she was struck down on her way back from t'mill.'

'If that's the case you'll hardly find her by peering through windows like a common thief. Now get back where you came from and don't bother me in this house again.' He shut the front door as hard as he could and slid the heavy bolt in place swiftly.

'Who was he?' Martin enquired when the Professor returned.

'A no-good. A villain. From the village, he was. They are always prying, trying to find out about my research here but I tell them nothing, of course. In fact, you're the first one I've discussed my research with in over eight years.'

Poor Ashley wasn't sure that was the sort of thing he wished to hear.

'And I'll tell you more,' Garron said. 'After we eat, I have something to show you. Something that will fascinate you and perhaps enable us to discover the real truth behind the coffin fly. It's down below. In the cellars.'

The meal was over. Garron had been acting tense and excited and his nervousness increased as they made their way through the house. He could barely contain his excitement as he ran his hand across the wood panelling and slid through the cellar door beneath the stairs.

'This way, Ashley,' he called over his shoulder. 'Now you're going to see why I wanted you to be the first one, the only other person who's ever taken such an interest in the coffin flies. The first one to witness my experiment.'

Martin Ashley followed him down the cold staircase and through a long dusty passage that was hung with ageing cobwebs. He could hear the scratching of rats as they passed the

entrance to a dozen underground cellars and once or twice Martin jumped back, terrified, as a thin rat suddenly darted across the passageway in front of him.

The journey through the underground passageways came to an abrupt and final end at a thick oak door that sealed off the final room at the rear of the house. Garron turned and his face was glistening beneath the glow of the lantern.

'Now,' he hissed, his breath escaping through clenched teeth. 'Now you'll see.'

There was little doubt in Martin's mind that Professor Garron was quite insane. He tried to back away as Garron swung open the heavy door but Garron held him tightly around the wrist and pulled him into the darkened cellar.

The door creaked shut behind him and Garron bolted it from the inside. 'There,' he said and his voice was even more highly pitched than normal. 'Come, Ashley. Come and be my first and only witness.'

Garron led him across the filthy cellar. It was a wide room with several old barrels standing against the left-hand wall and a long wooden table across the right-hand wall. Facing him across the cellar on the outer wall of the house hung a blanket. It covered a wide area of wall from floor to ceiling and Garron seated Martin on an ancient wooden bench to watch the great unveiling.

'My dear Ashley,' Garron said, standing before the blanket on the cellar wall. 'Now you will see why I requested your complete confidence when I invited you here.'

He jerked the curtain away from the wall. For a few long seconds Ashley could not understand the nature of the scene before him. The cellar wall had been removed and replaced by a huge sheet of thick glass that stretched from floor to ceiling. On the other side of the glass the earth was visible, pressing firmly against the glass. Ashley felt as though the world would spill into the cellar and swallow him. He could see a layer of snow just visible at the very top of the window. But it was the sight at the bottom of the glass that held his every attention.

The body of a young girl was lying crushed against the bottom of the window. She was on her side and her head was covered by a black canvas hood, tied tightly around her soft neck. Martin could see the skin stretched taut where the twine cut into her neck.

He shuddered. It was a grotesque sight. Pockets of brown earth had become trapped between her body and the smooth surface of the window and her body was squashed into obscene shapes in between. The crushing weight of the soil above her served to push the mishapen body even further from human recognition. The young man turned away and covered his mouth with his hand. He wanted to be alone, to be sick, to leave this dreadful cellar, but Garron was oblivious to his condition.

'Eight years,' he said. 'Eight years it's taken me to achieve this.'

Ashley moved away for he understood now that Garron had killed the girl for the sake of his gruesome experiment. He gagged, afraid for his own life should Garron realize his utter horror of the experiment and his pure contempt for the man.

'Come,' Garron called to him. 'You must take the first watch.'

He guided the young man back to the wooden bench and helped him draw it up close to the pane of glass.

'Now,' Garron sat down next to him 'I think you'll find it will take a few days before anything happens but just to be sure I think we should keep watch around the clock. You'll find writing materials in the drawer over by the table. It's important to keep a record of everything that takes place. To begin with, I think we should make a note every hour, yes?'

'What?' Martin shook his head, unable to comprehend what Garron was saying. He was less than a foot from the glass and beneath him he could see the misshapen breasts of the girl and they looked ugly and malformed. He tried to look away but the repellent sight seemed to have captured his attention.

'It's vital that we record our observations every hour to begin with,' Garron repeated. 'Of course, once the body begins to decay, our observation must be made almost continually. You would do well to observe the upper edge of the window here,' at this point Garron stood up and pointed to the top of the glass where the earth levelled off. 'This is where you will first notice the coffin flies for there is little doubt these creatures are well able to burrow down through six feet of earth with little hardship, Martin.'

The young man raised his eyes up the glass window and they were full of fear and revulsion. He could not trust himself to speak, merely to nod his head thereby indicating he understood what was required of him. Garron sat back down on the bench

and the two of them sat in silence watching the earth and body in the black hood. After a while, Garron stood up and laid his hand on Martin's shoulder. He patted him and smiled almost kindly before leaving the younger man to take over the first watch. He reached the door and turned to face his companion.

'You'll also find a cloth together with the writing materials, Martin. You may need to give the window an occasional wipe.'

With that he was gone and Martin heard the heavy bolts on the other side of the door slide into place. He turned and frowned at the door which had bolts on both sides.

There was little sense of time passing down in the rear cellar and Martin Ashley became increasingly frightened when he thought about his predicament. He tried not to look at the body or the glass wall, but he knew he had little choice. He'd found the writing materials and the cloth and he made occasional comments on the paper when he felt an hour had passed. The cellar was cold and damp and water dripped endlessly down on to the stone floor. He shivered and paced across the room many times to keep himself warm.

He spent the rest of his time staring through the glass at the insect kingdom beyond. Garron had left him the lantern and he was able to watch the progress of a fat earth-worm that moved through the loose earth twelve inches below the surface. It smeared the glass in its passing. A garden snail had become glued to the window close to the top right-hand corner.

A small colony of ants scampered across the surface of the earth and the man watched their progress with interest. All manner of creepy crawly insects passed by the inspection window during Martin's watch yet none of them ever climbed down more than twelve inches below the surface.

He'd made eight separate remarks during his watch when Garron drew back the bolts and entered the cellar with a tray of food and a jug of sour ale. He set the refreshments down on the bench alongside Martin and went up to the glass to study the girl's flesh in close-up. He nodded to himself and took the writing sheet from off the bench and read through the various remarks.

'Fine,' he nodded. 'Just fine. I'll be back shortly, Martin. I'll just bring you some more blankets to sleep on.'

'You mean I'm sleeping in here?' Martin was incredulous.

'But of course, Martin. You're a scientist now.'

With that he was gone, once again bolting the cellar door firmly behind him. And that was the pattern that was quickly established over the next few days. Martin sat watching the glass then Garron came down and took over while Martin slept.

There was little point in trying to escape for Garron was far stronger than the younger man and would easily overpower him. He tried withholding the observation notes but that did him no good for Garron simply refused to feed him. The situation was cut and dried; whilst Garron did not go out of his way to make Martin suffer unduly, he was not slow in letting the younger man know he had him securely locked up in his cellar.

The shifts became a series of broken nightmares whereby Martin would sleep uncomfortably, shivering with cold, while Garron kept watch or else he would be seated before the grisly carcass alone with just the ants and earth-worms and earwigs beyond the window to keep him company. Garron allowed him out between shifts in order to use the toilet facilities in one of the other cellars. Martin hated it for he could see the mountains of rats watching him as he bypassed them in utter terror.

It was difficult to judge the passage of time and he'd forgotten to mark down the number of shift changes in order to keep track of the days. From the decaying state of the body he estimated that he'd been locked up in the back cellar for close on a week. It was late at night and he was sitting quietly with the lantern burning about halfway through his shift when he saw the loose soil moving at the top of the window.

He sat upright, breathless, as something began burrowing down through the snow and the frozen earth. He almost screamed when a human finger scraped against the glass. The yellow glow from the lantern turned the nightmare finger into a wriggling yellow hand that parted the soil around the glass. Martin backed away from the glass, horrified as a face pressed against the outer surface. More soil was scraped away and Martin saw the face of the man who'd been looking in through the library window a week before. The man peered around the room, scowling at Martin as he did so.

Martin realized he had a chance to escape. The man was obviously still looking for the girl and Martin felt the cold tremor of fear run through him when he thought of how close

the man was to the decaying corpse below. He snatched up the paper that he'd used for his observations and quickly scrawled a message across the sheet. He held it up close to the top of the window for the man to read: 'Garron killed the girl. Garron killed Emma Watson'.

The man stared at the words for long seconds before the message came across. He glanced at Martin and there was hatred in his eyes.

'Not me,' Martin cried. 'Garron! Garron killed her. Not me! It was Garron!'

The man turned away and fled across the garden.

Almost an hour passed before they came. The entire village had assembled in the darkness and the men had agreed to storm the Manor. Martin heard them beating down the front door, heard footsteps running back and forth along the corridors above. The men were shouting, angry and bitter, the scent of blood was strong in their hearts. He heard the splintering crash of wood above and the desperate screams of Garron as he came full pelt along the cellar corridor. He reached the cellar door and Martin heard him scrabbling with the bolts.

'Martin!' Garron screamed. 'They are here! The men from the village! Oh, Martin! Don't let them in!'

The villagers clubbed him to the ground outside the door.

'They'll kill you, too!' Garron screamed. 'They'll kill us both!'

Martin heard the sounds of wooden clubs beating down on Garron's body. He heard the sickening crack of bone and the terrible screams and saw the slow trickle of bright red blood that oozed beneath the door. He slowly reached up and slid the heavy bolts firmly in place. Garron died slowly, curled up against the heavy oak door as the villagers clubbed and kicked the life from his body.

There was a stillness, almost a peaceful tranquillity that descended into the corridor when Garron died. The villagers were breathless and their burning desire for revenge had been temporarily sated. Martin moved away from the door, knowing what would surely follow. He didn't have to wait long.

A heavy fist fell against the door. More fists began pounding against the wood but with little effect. It was thick and strong, well able to withstand a battering. The pounding continued for

several minutes before the crowd fell back, talking over their plans. Martin was pressed against the door, trying hard to hear their voices. A plan had been proposed and now their voices began to swell and they sounded almost jolly out in the passage. A small cheer rose up and Martin stepped back as the door vibrated beneath the hammer blow from outside in the corridor.

At first he thought they were hammering the door down, perhaps with an axe, but then he realized his death would not be as swift as he'd feared. He listened to the heavy banging as the crowd outside nailed the door up tightly, making an escape impossible. The outside bolts had been closed and nails were driven deep into the wood, some of them finding their way right through to the inside.

Martin heard them leave and saw them peering down at him from the tiny space at the top of the inspection window. They hadn't realized how deep the glass went nor how thick and strong it was. After they'd gone for good, Martin tried to break the glass but there was nothing in the cellar that would do the job.

He stopped noticing the odd face against the glass as the days slipped by. His food was all gone and the candles for the lantern were running out. He was desperately cold and the hunger pains in his stomach drove him around the room like a desperate animal. He slept beneath a pile of filthy blankets and tried to avert his eyes from the decomposing body of Emma Watson during his waking hours.

The dried blood beneath the cellar door had soured and the cellar stank of human waste and his own unwashed body. A grey pallor coloured his skin and a scratchy stubble covered his face and chin. His eyes were sunken and his tongue became swollen, bulging out over his bottom lip. Martin Ashley was slowly going insane, still waiting patiently for the arrival of the coffin flies.

He was staring flatly at the line of soil across the top of the window when a small movement beneath him caught his eye. He glanced down at the body of Emma Watson. Her remains were nearing complete decay. Thin layers of greenish skin had begun to peel away from the bones of her shoulders and across her sagging belly like strips of raw pork. Gaseous pockets of air escaped into the surrounding soil, turning the earth a dark

liquid colour. The body had sagged and collapsed very slowly around the thin skeleton frame. He was about to look away when the same movement caught his eye.

A long swelling had appeared along the length of her thigh. The skin seemed to ripple from below.

He knelt down and wiped the glass slowly with the corner of his blanket. The swelling seemed to throb and pulse along the thigh. The skin was taut and almost cream coloured and a small tear appeared on the surface. He watched, horrified, as the tear began to widen and the dead skin of her leg ripped open and a thousand writhing maggots burst out from the wound and were compressed against the glass. The pressure was so great that many hundreds of them burst open and a white liquid stained the glass and the earth below. The whole mass of tube-like maggots spread across her thigh and belly and Martin Ashley knew that he was the first man to witness the birth of the coffin flies.

He staggered back from the window as another swelling burst open, this time above her breast. He could not comprehend the truth of what he saw. Never, in all his wildest dreams, had he ever thought that the coffin flies were already inside the human body. Millions of dormant cells, waiting for death before pushing their way up from the intestines to feed on the decaying meat of human flesh. The knowledge filled him with terror and dread.

He backed away into a corner and began tearing the clothes from his body, examining his skin for tell-tale signs of habitation. He did not want to die. He did not want to give birth to the army of bacteria that lodged within him. He screamed for there was no other alternative.

Even insanity would not save him. He squatted in the corner of the chill cellar and as he waited for death to come he thought he felt something moving within him, something growing, expanding deep down within his very soul. He screamed, feeling something moving in the back of his throat; for he was so far down the decaying road of death that they could wait no longer to feed on his pallid sickly flesh.

Epilogue

Little is known of the coffin fly even today though a tropical species of the genus *Megaselia* is known to exist and can pass its entire life

cycle inside the intestines of a human being. Infection occurs after eating fruit or any other uncooked food that has been previously contaminated with either eggs or larvae. It is hard to understand how this insect is able to live without oxygen but the fact that it does is unassailable.

The coffin fly

phylum	Arthropoda
class	Insecta
order	Diptera
family	Phoridae
genus & species	Conicera tibialis

Norman P. Kaufman

Rest in peace

There had never been such peace.

Hindle sat there on the shingled beach, his back against the cliff face lofting high above his head.

He had never known such peace. Never.

The hot sun beating on his upturned face; the eye-aching blue of a cloudless sky; the sea that shimmered and sparkled in the near distance, a stretch of ultramarine velvet extending into the farthest infinity. It was as if God had painstakingly accumulated the basic ingredients of unassailable serenity, had transported them in His wisdom to this desolate spot on the coastline of England, and laid them out individually in all their tranquil beauty.

Hindle relaxed against the friendly rocks, allowed his plump legs to lie flaccidly along the pebbled ground, content merely to blink at the scene around him in childish and unalloyed wonder. And as he lay there, he smiled. Just smiled.

Fifty years!

He closed his eyes, rested them from the glare of the sun as the memory intruded into his conscious thoughts. Fifty years with the same firm at the same premises in the same job. Eighteen thousand days of inhuman pressure, individually etched into his soul, hour by hour, minute by unbearable minute, until he could have shrieked aloud to the heavens that he could stand it no longer—

But no, that was silly, he chided himself. He did stand it, simply because he had to, simply because his livelihood depended on his working out those endless rafts of figures each day, for presentation to the Management on the following morning; and there was really nothing else for it but to subdue the suicidal urges, to quell any rebellion that might have survived the spiritual battering of too many years past. The equation, after all, was an obvious one: if he behaved, he ate, and his family ate and the mortgage was paid regularly and the death-

less round of bills was kept in uneasy control. If he did not behave, then he starved, and his wife and children too; he would lose his home; and his standard of living, so painstakingly maintained, would sink into a fathomless oblivion.

Thus had Hindle struggled, until – witness the huge sigh of relief! – his sixty-fifth birthday had dawned. Whereupon he had hurled down his pen and embarked immediately upon a new career, that of pursuing a life of unmitigated comfort, of late rising, of gazing with infinite arrogance and complacency on the multitudes who made their unwilling way to work each day. And now, here he was – a month into his retirement, lolling in unashamed laziness on this strip of beach, miles from home, hugging to himself the sensual pleasure of having nothing to do and nowhere to go and no one to speak to; but most of all there was this inestimable satisfaction of being uninvolved: the knowledge that today would be just as lethargic as yesterday, but not even half as carefree as tomorrow.

Hindle sighed, stretched his legs again in deliberately childish glee. Vaguely he wondered how long his wife Hetty would be with the drinks: she had volunteered to climb back along the endless slopes and to trek across the fields and rutted side roads in search of a shop that opened at seven in the morning. Not much chance of such an establishment in these lonely parts, but Hetty had felt energetic – ridiculous, a woman of her age! – and so he had just lain there and watched her go, aware of the heat already building up even at that time of day.

He closed his eyes, conscious of little but the languorous warmth of his own body; the incessant sobbing and crying of the seagulls as they winged their myriad ways across the placid ocean; and the globe of fire that burned down on his bare chest and legs. He could feel its intensity, could see its dazzling brightness through his closed eyelids...

A shadow blotted out the sun.

His eyes flickered, closed, opened again: it was as though he was viewing the scene above him through a slow-motion lens. He lay there motionless, his lips parting in a soundless scream, the sun blurring his vision, the sweat on his body growing suddenly cold.

Two hundred feet above him, a huge sports car had skidded off the edge of the cliff. Even from that distance, the shrill cry of despair came clearly to Hindle's ears. He stared in a paralysis

of horror at the underside of the vehicle, at the final futile spinning of the four great wheels. For that solitary scintilla of time, for that single splinter out of his life, the motor-car seemed to hang over him, suspended between sea and sky, hovering like some big black monstrous carrion crow. Hindle's mouth was an O of stunned fear, his throat contracting in a whimper of frightened disbelief.

The car swung out in a lazy arc across the blue panorama of the sky, dangling there for that infinitesimal micro-second between heaven and earth. And then it was falling, falling, its front wheels tipping towards the waves, its speed suddenly inexorable and terrifying. And there – see! – the driver, a woman, her long hair flying back in the wind as she struggled to free herself of the restrictive safety belt. But the tilt of the car was too great, it held her bodyweight against the strap as she tore uselessly at it with her fingers. Hindle's gaze took in the open windows, the helpless retching sobbing coming to him with eerie clarity in the quiet of the morning. But he lay there, unable to think, unable to move, unable to credit the evidence of his own appalled eyes.

Frantically, she wrenched at the door of the car; and pinned to the seat as she was, such an action was less than useless. Yet in her agony of mind, it must have been a last hopeless reflex action. The door swung wide open; the car plummeted towards earth like some grotesque one-winged bird – and the shriek of pure dread dinned against Hindle's eardrums as the vehicle crashed into the edge of the beach.

Until the very last day of his life, he would never forget that moment of impact.

Disintegration. Immediate and total disintegration. There was no other way to describe it. In a heart-stopping thunder of sound, the car concertinaed and dissolved into a mass of screeching grinding metal; the four wheels, rent violently from the crushed bodywork, bouncing along the shore or rolling into the greedy lapping waves of the sea; the windows shattering into countless shards of glass that showered and tinkled over vast areas of sun-baked beach.

And then – in an instant, it seemed – the silence again. Silence but for the squawking of the seagulls and the splashing of the waves on the pebbles; silence but for the wild throbbing of Hindle's heart. It was as if nobody else was alive on the whole

planet: nobody but himself, sprawl in dazed solitude, his gaze fixed on the crumpled wreck, and on the dead girl wrapped around the steering-wheel.

Dead?

DEAD?

A sound dropped into the uncanny stillness. His soul seemed to shrivel with the shock: distinctly out of the ruins of the car came a vague murmur, a sighing gasping moan wrung involuntarily from the woman he had thought beyond all feeling. Hindle's hand shot to his chest as a stabbing pain shocked his heart. Yet still he did not – could not – stir from this sun-kissed corner of his little world.

Again the sound, the quavering cry of a young woman whose mind raved with pain. Her head moved in distress, another muted whine of agony came through to him . . . Hindle sat there, forced his eyes elsewhere, across the stretch of empty beach, where the early morning sunlight yielded no sight of any mortal being. No one but Hindle. No one but a woman trapped inside a wrecked car.

He drew his legs up carefully, and hoisted himself to his feet, grimacing as the blood circulated round his legs. Somehow he forced himself forward, in tight little strides across the pebbled earth. Slowly he moved: slowly, slowly. Reluctantly . . .

Hindle stood there at the side of the vehicle, peering in through the glassless windows . . . The roof had caved in, and cast a dull shadow over the interior; but gradually his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and his mouth tightened as he took in the salient and horrible details.

The girl was around twenty, twenty-two; she wore a bright yellow trouser-suit, and her hair was thick and brown and lustrous, topping a face that had once been beautiful. But now the hair was streaked with blood, the blood that had undoubtedly splashed up from the deep scars in her head and face and neck. The steering-column of the wheel had speared her chest and mangled her breasts; her legs sprawled at crazy angles beneath the dashboard; her mouth was a mess of blood and flesh and fractured teeth. And a sliver of glass stood sentinel amidst the jellied carnage of her left eye.

Yet still she lived. She lived – and as Hindle gazed down at her in numbed horror, a tongue of flame flickered up from beneath the engine, a flame that drew the breath of its life from

the petrol tank, that reached out and touched Hindle's flinching body with its abrupt heat. Instinctively he stepped back, back further and further until his heels jammed against the foot of the cliffs. And it was then that the petrol tank exploded, erupting in a vast loop of liquid fire, the concussive shock of the blast hurling him backwards, spreadeagling him against the unsympathetic rock behind him.

Cursing, he forced himself upright: and his breath rattled in his throat as he saw the woman there, now doubly trapped in the ring of fire encircling the car. The explosion had shredded the vehicle almost into its component parts, and the combined weight of the unrecognizable metal had ensnared the girl's broken body, burying her up to her neck in splintered steel.

Hindle chewed his bottom lip, his eyes alight with panic and indecision. If the girl was still alive, there was yet time to tear at the mass of debris that clutched her, time to lift her out of there and to lay her on the beach away from the burning wreck. And then – it was possible, *anything* was possible – medical aid could perhaps restore her to life, maybe one day to some kind of health—

He hesitated: his groping mind pictured the hubbub, the endless fuss and palaver that would inevitably transpire if he attempted such a task. If the girl lived, he might be proclaimed a hero: in itself an enviable situation. Even if she died, his efforts would not go unrecognized or unappreciated. But what – his mind faltered – what precisely would that *mean*?

Involvement. That would be the net result of his endeavours: the involvement he had sought to avoid after half a century of embroilment in it. There would be questions to answer, probing questions that would rip the very innards out of his privacy, that would dispel his carefully husbanded, vigilantly nurtured way of life for evermore . . . People pointing at him in the street, people stopping to talk to him, people interviewing him, people asking questions . . . People, questions, people, questions – pressures he had hoped, had *believed*, were behind him for the rest of his days.

The girl's head moved, sluggishly, as if she was using the last founts of her strength. An incoherent yammering issued from her paper-white lips, as the flames built higher and higher round the doors and chassis . . . Hindle's eyes glittered feverishly at her; there was still time, still time— He inched frac-

tionally nearer: it was incredible that someone with such injuries should live on.

Suddenly, her one remaining eye swivelled round, her imploring gaze locked with his. From across the scant few yards of beach, from across the infinite gulf that separated her shattered body from rescue, they stared at each other, the pensioner and the once-pretty young woman. And in Hindle's tortured mind, thoughts jostled confusedly for expression.

Involvement. The fragmentation of his well-earned peace and quiet. People and questions. Questions and people. People people people people—

'Fry!'

The demented syllable popped from his gnawed lips, startling him with his own savage eloquence.

'Fry!'

He screamed at her as she leaned against the steering wheel, her face already blackening with the nearness of the smoke. Hindle clutched at his forehead with both hands. His brain felt like a lump of molten iron, swimming about inside his head, banging from side to side against the interior of his skull . . .

Questions questions questions—

'Leave - me - alone!' he sobbed. 'Let me be! Let me be!'

The flames licked up into her face, the searing heat turning her hair into a halo of smouldering, sputtering strands. And just the one word emerged from her dying throat.

'Please . . .'

It was little more than a whisper: but Hindle could sense the plea, the hopeless prayer in that one last pathetic monosyllable—

'Damn you!' he yelled at her. 'Damn you to hell!'

The fire lanced into the cabin of the car, the dull roar of the flames drowning his tormented cries; and as he watched, the girl's remaining eye dissolved in a glutinous implosion of watery blood.

'Leave me alone!' his voice begged her. 'Haven't I had enough . . .?'

The gelatinous gore that had once been an eye slid down the girl's cheek and sizzled into non-existence under the fearsome heat. Great gouts of hot blood spewed incessantly from her mouth as the holocaust devoured her; the stench of cooked flesh wafted into Hindle's nostrils, lodging in his throat . . . He

moved back, slowly, like a man in some awful dream. Vaguely he was aware of sirens ringing and bells jangling and vehicles and people in the far distance. But he stopped and turned back, just for one brief moment. His lips worked spasmodically.

'Fifty years!' he shrilled. 'Fifty bloody years—!' His voice softened into a choking supplication. 'Don't you understand, Miss? I couldn't have taken any *more* . . .'

Her head had ceased to move. And soon the fire had melted the flesh from her bones, had dissolved the bones into crystalline dust.

Hindle stared down at the remains of the car, from his hiding-place halfway up the meandering path. There were people there now, and some were looking around them as if searching for the man who had fled this destruction. But they would not, would never find him. The very real danger of Involvement was past.

By and by he stirred and moved slowly up the hill: Hetty should be back soon. And the fire had made him rather thirsty.

Stevie

The mid-afternoon of September 9th 1970 melted over the moors in purple shadows. A lonely rook flew close to the roof of Chantry Hall, a large grey stone mansion standing on the edge of Goathland Moor. It settled in the massive crenellated tower, attached to the east side of the house, just as the old iron clock chimed four times.

A long red sports Ferrari drew up at the main entrance. Rosalie Stratton had come home from her usual fierce afternoon drive across the moors. She carried her forty-two years with a calculated abandon. Medium height, with small bones organized in a perfect frame, covered with firm flesh and ivory skin, oval face with slightly arrogant lips and large grey eyes, a tide of thick brown hair cut short, dressed with an enchanting negligence: Rosalie Stratton was outstanding.

As she entered the hall, Amos Hawk, the indispensable factotum of Chantry Hall, came towards her.

'Stevie is missing,' he said. 'When Nanny Donnan went to fetch him from his afternoon rest, he wasn't in the nursery.'

Rosalie was not alarmed. 'He's probably in Aunt Lettice's room. He's fascinated by her dogs, you know.'

Amos looked uneasy. 'That was the first place we looked for him. He isn't there.'

Rosalie went into the drawing-room. Logs were burning in the huge fireplace, the light from the flames glowing on the figure of a boy, stretched out on a sheepskin rug.

'James, have you seen Stevie?' she asked.

Without turning his head the boy said, 'I've already told Nanny and Hawk that I did not see Stevie at all today.' He resumed the close observation of a large, exquisitely preserved toad, glued to a flat stone. 'My latest mummy. Just came out of the airtight case. I call him Rameses.'

'Leave the thing alone, James,' Amos told him. 'We're worried about Stevie. No one can find him.'

James turned on his back and very slowly rose up. He was

just the right height for his thirteen years, as lean as a martin, and so faultlessly handsome that it was almost unpleasant. His face was a combination of the Botticelli angels and the Velasquez princelings. The inherited grey eyes of his mother were tinged with smoky blue. His dark hair was cut in the medieval fashion, with a deep fringe that almost touched his eyes. Rosalie had had some superb reproductions of Botticelli paintings in her bedroom while pregnant with James. Apparently that was the reason for his uncanny resemblance to the faces of the Renaissance and his Borgia-like approach to life. His blue jeans clung tightly to his legs, and a fluffy white sweater completed the picture of decadent laziness.

'Let's search the house,' he said. 'Stevie must be hiding somewhere.'

Nanny Donnan appeared in the doorway, pale and frightened, with tears streaming down her fat ageing cheeks.

'Now, Nanny, there's no need to cry,' Rosalie told her. 'You know that Stevie wouldn't go out on the moors by himself. He's in the house somewhere. We'll find him.'

'We'll search the house from top to bottom,' said Amos.

Chantry Hall had always instilled a certain fear in Rosalie ever since she had moved in fourteen years ago. Widowed and remarried within four weeks, pregnant by the lover who had become the new husband, desperately seeking a remote place where she could stabilize herself, she had remembered Aunt Lettice counting her remaining days in a lonely Yorkshire mansion. Not wasting a moment, she had rushed up to see her with a proposition to buy it.

'I will give it to you, Rosalie,' her aunt had said. 'I do not need any more money - I have all I need. There are two conditions - one that you will give me a suite of rooms and care for me for life. The other reason is that, should you ever decide to leave Chantry Hall, when I am gone, you must not sell it, rent it, or give it away to anybody, but will demolish it complete with all its contents. I love this house and everything it has meant to me. I will not disgrace it by letting strangers romp around. Let the ruins rest in the grounds - in the end it will be overgrown by heather. Get your solicitors to draft the contract. As soon as it is signed, you can move in.'

Rosalie was the sole beneficiary of the estate of her husband, John Sherrington. She had no problem in selling the rich agri-

cultural lands and farms that she had inherited. When she moved in to Chantry Hall she was what she had always wanted to be – a rich independent woman.

She had reorganized the mansion with a restless speed, allocating two rooms and a bathroom in the back part of the ground floor to Aunt Lettice and her nurse. She had hoarded everything valuable and pretty in the main bedroom, just in time for James's birth. She had always felt that Chantry Hall had never really accepted her. It had been built around 1820 by a romantic recluse on the site of some ruins, dating from Tudor times. Only the Tudor tower had refused to crumble under the grip of decay.

Her aunt had married Desmond Winwood, the then owner of the Hall, in 1926, and the house was quickly established as one of England's wealthiest and most beautiful homes. Lettice was just twenty-six years old, clever, elegant, very amusing and very amused by life. For twenty-four years she steered the house on the highest crest of living. Her house-parties were described in the social columns of the international press. Life assumed a meteoric speed. She and Desmond hardly noticed that they had no children. When Desmond was killed in a car accident, Lettice never fully emerged from the utter darkness of shock. Both her legs had been broken in the crash, and had not mended – she was confined to her bed. The slide to a permanent alcoholic nightmare was quick and devastating. She drank a repulsive mixture of gin and dark beer, and her rooms were littered with empty bottles and unwashed glasses. Her nurse, a former prison wardress engaged for her strong arms and her ability to deal with Aunt Lettice, finally succumbed to drinking as well.

Four tiny Pomeranian dogs shared the rooms with the two dipsomaniacs. They were old, blind, and hairless, two of them dragging enormous hernias between their legs. They were never taken out, but ate, drank, slept and made a frightful mess on a rubber sheet in the corner of the room. But Aunt Lettice loved them. Beside the drink, they were the only things in the world she had left; the squalor, degradation, filth and stench the only way of life – and death – she could envisage.

'Nanny and you can search the ground floor,' Amos told Rosalie. 'James and I will take the landing and the Tower. And the outhouses, of course.'

With the trembling Nanny, Rosalie went through the rooms. The dining-room, the reception rooms and the French boudoir still showed the lavishness that Desmond Winwood had showered on his wife during their life together. But all was covered by a thick layer of dust, as most of the rooms were never used. The library, lined almost to the ceiling with books, with its deep velvet armchairs and heavy wooden bookstands, was the room most likely for a little boy to hide in.

'Stevie!' Nanny Donnan called. 'Please come to me.'

Rosalie lifted the heavy curtains and looked behind them. She opened the doors of a large cabinet and moved two iron dragons guarding the fireplace. 'Stevie,' she called. But only silence, dark and thick like the waters of a disused well, answered her.

'That leaves only Aunt Lettice's rooms,' she said.

'But we looked there when we first realized Stevie was missing,' Nanny said, dreading the thought of a second visit.

'We'll have to look once more, Nanny, just to be sure.'

Lettice's room was in semi-darkness, lit by only a dim corner lamp. On the large bed Lettice lay amidst a heap of crumpled sheets, stained coverlets, empty beer bottles and glasses. She was deep in a drunken sleep, her face blotchy and puffed, tufts of red hair circling her bald patches, her mouth open, with a trickle of thick dark mess running across her double chin. The nurse was wedged into an armchair too small for her massive frame, and was swigging from a bottle. One of the Pomeranian dogs lay in the middle of the floor, dead.

'Aaahh!' wailed Nanny.

'Hush, Nanny,' said Rosalie. 'The little dog is lucky to be out of it all.'

They returned to the drawing-room. Dusk was falling by the time Amos and James returned from their search.

'We've looked everywhere. Even in the chimney of the orchard house. And in the Tower. There was no sign of Stevie,' Amos said.

Nanny Donnan buried her face in her hands.

'I'll drive through the moors,' Rosalie said. 'If I don't find him we'll have to call the police.'

'Shall I come with you?' asked Amos.

'You'd better stay here. Nanny and James might need you.'

She put on a thick tweed coat and wound a shawl around her head. As she started the red Ferrari the iron clock in the yard

chimed seven times. The moors were in a semi-coma. Her headlights picked out the verges of the narrow road, the clusters of heather, the tassels of the thick spreading mist. A rabbit screamed in final agony. A demented moth crashed on the windscreen. Looking for Stevie, Rosalie thought back to the time before he had been born. The year was 1950 and she was just twenty-two years old, wild, beautiful, strong-willed and hungry for life. John Sherrington had been thirty-two, a generous landowner and the Squire of a Cheshire village. They were married after only two months of romance, where she had supplied all the turbulence and ecstasy. She loved the first year as *châtelaine* of the solid manor house. Sunday morning sherry in the library with the Vicar and local landed gentry; being the bright spark of the weekly sewing afternoons in Miss Audrey's Good Neighbour's Workshop. Once a month, all chiffon and pearls, she had played the piano in the music room for a select few. That was the scene for the public to talk about, envy and admire. But behind the front lurked long silent nights and the acceptance of John's impotence.

Amos Hawk was John Sherrington's estate manager. He was in his early thirties, tall and sinewy, and his Nordic ancestry was pronounced in his all-over, fair handsomeness. When he finally drifted into her bed, he took her in a silent, calm, almost solemn manner. There were other lovers as time went by. Both John and Amos accepted her sudden 'shopping trips' to Chester and Crewe, and the overnight stays in intimate country inns. Four years later the extremely agreeable life at the manor house was brutally shattered. John was rushed to hospital with an apparent stomach upset, but the diagnosis was cancer. The slow process of dying set in. With death keeping vigil next door, Amos never entered her bedroom. She spent most of her time trying to hold John's ebbing life in her palms. Two years passed.

One day an old jeep arrived at the door of the neighbouring farm. The driver was a friend of the son of the house, Anthony Stratton. Profession? Adventurer. Age? Thirty. Address? The world. Rosalie was ripe for a fresh affair. It started a week after they first met in a deserted house up on the moors. By the time John had died, she was six months pregnant. She, Anthony and Amos came together to Chantry Hall, and James was born shortly afterwards. Immediately after the christening Anthony

was off again on one of his adventurous journeys. She never knew if he was hitch-hiking in Mozambique, digging for gold in Peru, or just fishing in the Hebrides.

He returned home infrequently, his trunk full of exotic presents for everyone. They would be kept enthralled by his vivid tales. Nights in Rosalie's bed, extending deep into the morning hours, were ablaze with hungry, violent and savage mating. After two or three weeks, Anthony would suggest a visit to his wife's bank in Leeds. That was the fanfare for his imminent departure to faraway haunts, a bundle of Rosalie's credit cards in his hand. He was not interested in how she lived between his visits, how she coped with Lettice's decay, or the education of James. As far as he was concerned, Amos was there to take care of everything . . .

And Amos did. He ran Chantry Hall as a manager, dealt with all the tradesmen, supervised all necessary repairs and paid the bills from a special household account. He also helped Nanny to clean all the rooms that were in use, and twice a day would stoke up the old Aga cooker with coal. Many times, summoned by the nurse's scream, he would help to lift the drunken Lettice back on to her bed, which she had fallen out of.

The rest of his time was taken up with endlessly and patiently loving Rosalie. Soon after James was born, she had resumed her 'shopping trips' and sudden stays at quiet country inns. Her red sports car had become a well-known feature in the streets of Chester and Crewe. It had acquired a sort of reference in people's minds, like Lady Godiva's horse, or Florence Nightingale's lamp. But she was always childishly pleased to find Amos waiting for her in bed.

James's bedroom was on the other side of the landing, and he knew of the nocturnal affairs between his mother and Amos. He was neither shocked nor interested. He was too involved in his own business.

He was a brilliant, difficult boy. After being sent home from three prominent boarding schools for being 'too advanced' by far, and consequently arrogant, dominating and corrupt, there followed a succession of tutors at Chantry Hall. Their stay was usually brief, due to the planned tyranny of their pupil. Finally, Rosalie had agreed to the boy's suggestion that he teach himself. He had a photographic memory, and history, mathematics, physics and geography registered clearly and easily in his mind.

But his foremost interest was Ancient Egypt. With his usual eloquence he went through the charts showing the dynasties, kings and events, in a matter of days. But long weeks were spent studying the minutest details of mummies and the art of mummification. For his tenth birthday he had asked to have a library equipped in one of the rooms of the Tower.

During his next brief visit home, Anthony was told about his son's own approach to Ancient Egypt and its secrets. James invited him to look round the laboratory. There, the son and father spent some hours getting to know each other, for the first time. Slowly and silently Anthony went around the large square room. The long table close to the windows was covered in a thick white plastic sheet. A trolley, resembling that from an operating theatre, was laid with a selection of instruments. A large glass-fronted cabinet housed a collection of smooth and crested frogs, newts, toads and lizards, all posed with natural ease and stuck on to flat stones or blocks of wood. Their eyes were large and bright, almost seeing; their skin smooth, seemingly slippery, as though they had just that moment crawled out of a deep and slimy pond.

'They are absolutely perfect mummies,' James told his father. 'They will remain like this until the end of the world.'

Anthony pointed to a row of wooden boxes, with glass tops, on a long bench in the far corner of the laboratory.

'What are those?'

'Come and see.' James led his father over to them. 'Mummies in the making.'

In every box was a small shape tightly wrapped in white linen. 'It takes four to six months in those airtight boxes before they can come out and sit in the glass cabinet.'

'How do you get these specimens?' his father wanted to know.

'That's easy. I have a tricycle with a box attached to it, like the delivery boy's, you know. I ride all over the moors. I net the toads and frogs in springtime, when they are spawning in the bog ponds. The newts are there almost all the time. The lizards live in groups on the moors, and towards evening they are sleepy so it's no problem to catch them.'

Anthony looked out the window at a school of rooks that were flying low over the moors. 'How do you kill them?' he asked.

'I keep them alive for a day or two – I like to know the subjects I am working with. They are all different. Their expressions, fears and movements. Finally I put them in the airtight boxes for an hour or so. That way they die with their eyes wide open. A great asset in mummification.'

That evening Anthony had a long talk with his wife. At the end of it he said, 'Apparently our son is some kind of genius. I find him terrifying and macabre. I didn't know him before today – and now that I do, I will try to forget him.'

The lights of an approaching car brought Rosalie to her senses. She was looking for Stevie. The moors were silent and hostile. She stopped the car and lowered her head to rest on the steering wheel. Stevie, she called, deep in her heart, Stevie . . .

Her always smiling, ever-loving son Stevie. He was the result of Anthony's sudden flight from some distant Pacific island three years ago, and his subsequent prolonged stay at the Hall. For a time it had seemed he had come home for good. But when Rosalie told him of her pregnancy he decided to 'sit it out' in India and to return home after the birth. He had seen Stevie for the first time when the boy was two years old – and had loved him dearly from that very moment. He made Rosalie buy a horse and, with Stevie locked in his arms, went for long rides across the moors. In the evenings he transformed the nursery into a teeming jungle, a ship with a hundred sails, or an underwater castle, with his never-ending tales. Again Rosalie hoped that he had come home to stay. But after a few weeks he had let the horse loose on the moors, taken Rosalie once again to the bank, and left.

It was almost ten o'clock when Rosalie, exhausted, returned home. Amos was waiting on the porch. As she shook her head in despair, he took her arm and led her gently into the house.

'I'll phone the police,' he said.

Within twenty minutes two uniformed constables arrived. Amos told them briefly about the missing boy.

'When did you first miss him?'

'At about four o'clock. He was in his cot, but had gone by the time I went to fetch him,' Nanny told them, holding back her tears.

'It's past ten now. Why didn't you call us sooner?'

'We were searching the house. At that time it didn't occur to us that he could have gone out. He has never done that before - he was terrified to go anywhere alone,' said Rosalie.

'Are you sure that he isn't here?'

'Quite sure, Officer,' said Amos.

'Did you have any visitors this afternoon? Any strangers, calling-salesmen, charity collectors, hippies?'

'Nobody,' said Amos again.

'Who is this?' asked one of the constables, looking down at James, who lay on the floor with his face buried in the sheep-skin rug.

'That's my other son, James.'

'Is he sick?' the other policeman asked.

'He's thinking,' Nanny told him.

'A funny way to think,' the constable said. 'Any chance of getting him back in this world for a bit?'

'Get up, James,' Amos said in a determined voice.

'Please, James!' insisted Rosalie. The boy stretched out his arms and rubbed his face in the fluffy rug. Then he turned and sat up, drawing his knees to his chin.

'Yes, Mother?' he asked.

One of the constables took over. 'It's your small brother. When did you last see him?'

'I did not see Stevie at all today. I've spent most of the day in the library.'

'Not at school?'

'No,' James told them firmly. 'Not at school.'

It was too dark to start the search on the moors, the constables told Rosalie. It would start at dawn. Of course she should telephone them immediately should he reappear.

Dawn was breaking over the Tower of Chantry Hall. Two police cars, each crewed by four men, stood at the main entrance. In the hall, Rosalie and Amos stood waiting. A Detective-Inspector explained the routine of the search. The cars would cover all roads within a five-mile radius of the Hall. If no trace of the boy was found, reinforcements with tracker dogs would be called in.

'And now I'd like to see the nursery, if that's possible,' the Detective-Inspector told Rosalie.

'Yes, of course,' she said, and led the way up the wide carved staircase and down the long landing bordered by dove-coloured doors.

'Are these all bedrooms?'

'Yes. There are six altogether, but only four in use, plus the nursery.'

The nursery was in the far corner of the landing. It was an obvious confirmation that a loved child lived there, full of toys and flowers.

'Now, Nanny,' the Inspector said gently, 'did you undress Stevie to put him to bed?'

Nanny's face darkened with anger. 'Of course I did! He was wearing a long nightshirt – he always does, he hates pyjamas.'

The detective approached the cot and pulled the covers aside. A pale blue nightshirt was tucked underneath.

'Is that the one he was wearing?' he said.

'Why yes, that's the one.'

'It seems then that he took it off. Consequently he must have put on something else. Can he dress himself?'

'Yes, he most certainly can,' Rosalie said proudly. 'He has been able to do so ever since he was two years old. His father taught him to be independent.'

'Exactly how old is the boy?'

'Exactly three years and two weeks.'

'Could you possibly tell me what clothes are missing from his wardrobe?'

The cupboard was opened, and after a close examination of the rows of tiny hangers, Rosalie said, 'His favourite jockey suit. Pale blue, hooped with green, with a matching green cap. I went shopping with him two weeks ago and he chose it himself.'

The detective looked puzzled. 'Could he possibly get out of the nursery and the house without anyone knowing?'

'He apparently did,' said Amos. 'He has never done anything like this before. Perhaps we were too certain of him. Once he was in bed, he was safe, or so we always thought.'

'I must ask you once more, Mrs Stratton, are you absolutely sure that your son is not in the house?'

Rosalie looked at Amos and Nanny, then said, 'We searched the house from top to bottom, all of us. Stevie is not here, Inspector.'

'Then we are off to the moors.'

The old iron clock in the yard chimed seven times. In the kitchen the cook was singing a nursery ballad, as she always did in the morning. Amos led Rosalie downstairs and into the drawing-room.

'Even at times like this, people must eat,' he said. 'We will have to prepare some tea and sandwiches for the search parties and the police.'

'Let's get the caterers in from Leeds,' Rosalie said. 'It may take days.'

There was no trace of Stevie, and in the early afternoon fifty uniformed policemen with tracker dogs fanned across Goathland Moor. Rosalie had sent a caterers' van to follow the searchers.

'It is extremely kind of you, Mrs Stratton, to care for the ordinary human needs at a time like this,' said the Inspector.

'That's the only thing left for me to do,' she said sadly.

'That reminds me.' He looked at her. 'Can I speak to Mr Stratton?'

Amos stepped in: 'Mr Stratton is away, Inspector. He has been for the past year. We do not know when he will be back.'

'Away?' said the Inspector. 'For such a long time? What does he do?'

'He is an explorer.'

'Hm. Perhaps he came back and took Stevie away with him,' the Inspector suggested.

Amos looked angry. 'Mr Stratton would not do such a thing. There is no need. Chantry Hall and everyone in it waits for him with open arms whenever he comes back.'

'That's right,' confirmed Rosalie.

With the falling dusk car-loads of policemen returned to Chantry Hall. The search would be resumed the next day. A routine formed. The police would arrive at dawn, followed by the Inspector and the sergeant. Men with dogs would fan out across the moors. The caterers' van followed.

In his Tower laboratory, James was preparing a double mummification. Wearing a high-collared white overall and a surgeon's cap, he was laying out scalpels and thin knives on a tray. In a wooden box two lizards were running frantically from side to side. James peered down at them, observing them closely. Slowly, he closed the glass top of the box and secured it with clips on four sides. Then he watched the lizards in their airless

agony trying to climb the walls of the box, arching over each other, turning on their backs, and finally stretched out, their tails like bizarre ornaments, clinging to the sides of the box with their eyes wide open.

After half an hour they progressed to the white-covered table close to the window. Carefully, James put them on their backs and secured their heads and legs with strips of plastic tape. Then he cut them open from head to tail and removed all the internal organs with a pair of tweezers. He cleaned the insides with carbonate of soda and packed them with tiny wads of linen, soaked in resin. Then, with extreme skill, he sewed the skin together. He soaked lumps of cotton wool in the tincture of myrrh and carefully washed the lizards all over. Finally he wound a thin linen bandage around each of their heads, legs, trunks, and tails, and put them side by side in a long airtight box. 'You should make it in four months,' he said, taking off his overall.

It was eleven o'clock and the morning seemed to stand still in the whole house. When James entered the drawing-room, his mother, Amos and Nanny Donnan, who were assembled there, reminded him of a badly taken photograph of a family group.

'Any news?' he asked.

'No. No news at all,' his mother replied.

Nanny was sobbing quietly. James went to her, took her hand in both of his, and said, 'Stevie will be back, Nanny, you'll see, he will be back.'

'How can he survive?' she wailed, 'Two nights on the moors. All alone, cold, hungry and terrified.'

Amos looked at Rosalie. Her face registered her agony. Nanny was right. The tiny boy would be terrified.

Shortly after noon the Inspector arrived back from the moors. As he entered the drawing-room they knew he had brought bad news. They got to their feet.

'We have found the first positive clue, Mrs Stratton. We have found this green cap,' he said. 'Is this Stevie's?'

'It is,' they all said.

'We found it two miles from here on the way to Goathland. About fifty yards from the road, stuck in the heather. It seems that he was picked up and taken away by car.'

Rosalie Stratton took the green cap from the Inspector and turned it slowly in her hands.

'Mrs Stratton, can you think of any reason – any reason at all – why Stevie should sneak out of the nursery and go out on to the moors?'

'It could be his longing for his father,' Amos suddenly said. 'He saw Stevie for the first time about a year ago. They loved each other from the start. Before he left on his travels, he took Stevie to a window overlooking the moors. An aeroplane was crossing the horizon. "Watch for the aeroplanes, Stevie," he said. "I will come back in one of them soon and I'll never leave you again." I was walking by them at the time, and heard the conversation.'

'But he was only two years old then,' said the Inspector. 'Could he still remember that?'

'We have kept it warm in his memory,' Rosalie answered. 'We wanted him to remember his father and wait for his return.'

'There's a regular flight from Yeadon just after three o'clock in the afternoon. Perhaps Stevie saw the plane and went out to meet his father,' Amos suggested.

'And that would explain why he put on his new suit. When we bought it I told him that he should wear it when his father comes home.'

'Well, that seems to be the most probable explanation then,' muttered the Inspector. 'We'll intensify the search. I'll call in further reinforcements for a detailed search of the moors, and also to check the villages, garages, and holiday camps in the area.'

Within two hours the full machinery of a vast search was in motion. Police with detectives, walkie-talkies and dogs covered the moors. A fleet of police cars sped to villages and towns. Stevie's photograph was blown up and displayed in shop windows, banks and pubs. The garage and petrol pump attendants were asked if any car had been serviced carrying the child.

The telephone at Chantry Hall rang incessantly. A score of people telephoned; Stevie had been seen here there and everywhere. All information had to be followed up. The local journalists arrived with a cluster of photographers. A clairvoyant from York alighted from a blue Mercedes car to offer his services.

Another night passed and the inhabitants of the Hall sank deeper and deeper into the well of despair. Only Aunt Lettice floated above it all in a happy oblivion. The local morning paper

carried a large picture of Stevie and another of Chantry Hall, and gave the first story about the missing child.

The national press arrived soon afterwards. A patient reporter who had been hanging around outside the Hall for hours had finally been invited in by James. He suggested that the reporter should see his collection of mummified reptiles. The man was extremely impressed. He took a number of pictures in the laboratory and swept his editor off his feet with a scoop about the fascinating brother of the missing child. A boy, the article said, who is too clever to attend school, who has accumulated vast knowledge in many fields just teaching himself with the help of his mother's library. His strangely handsome face, enlarged on the front page, was gazing over the breakfast tables of thousands of households the next morning.

Yet another two days had passed. The police were joined by a number of private cars, spilling out dozens of searchers. Two helicopters were crossing and recrossing the area. Worst of all, the massive Yorkshire mansion had become a tourist attraction: people were picnicking as close to the house as the police allowed them. Ice-cream and Coca-cola vendors were there in force.

James was obviously basking in the interest aroused by the article about 'Stevie's Fascinating Brother', and appeared frequently at the windows of the Tower. Nanny was kept in bed under sedation. Aunt Lettice's room had acquired an atmosphere beyond the wildest dreams of Dickens: the dropsy, diagnosed some years ago, had reached its climax. Her face, puffed up and blue, resembled that of a tragic rubber clown floating high above a fun fair. Rosalie was at her wits' end.

The evening of the sixth day found Chantry Hall suddenly silent. The picnickers had driven away, the ice-cream vendors departed without the usual jingle, and even the rooks were quiet.

'They'll never find him now, I know it,' sighed Rosalie.

A few minutes later the Inspector phoned. 'We've turned the country upside down. Dozens of people seem positive that they have seen Stevie, but nobody is absolutely sure. We will call off the search tomorrow. Of course the file will not be closed; our men will be on the look-out for Stevie indefinitely.'

Next day, it was all over. Rosalie locked up the two reception rooms which had functioned as police headquarters, then went up to see Nanny.

'The search is off, Nanny. But we must not give up hope. Perhaps Stevie is being held by someone who for some reason wanted a little boy. One day that person might bring him back to us. We must try to believe that, Nanny, we must.'

At noon James came into the nursery. Nanny had just finished tidying the large toy cupboard. 'That's right, Nanny,' he told her. 'You must keep the nursery shipshape, ready for Stevie any time he comes home.' The old woman burst into floods of tears. 'He will come home one day, I know. And you must help his return by going on doing things as if he had never left. There is a psychic logic in that. You must continue to have your meals here, as you did with Stevie, cook his favourite dishes and put everything on his plate. The more precise you are, the sooner he will be back.'

For Nanny in her misery, it was something to cling to. James is right, she thought, I must carry on the same as I did when Stevie would go out with his mother. I knew then that he would be back – and I must believe that he will be back again.

At first Rosalie and Amos did not like the idea of the carry-on-as-usual nursery. But in a few days they realized that there was some sort of consolation in James's idea. If the nursery was to be left closed, dark and empty, that would have been final. As it was, with hot meals in his gaily painted pottery, his cot turned in the evening, and his long nightshirt spread on the coverlet, it was possible to believe that the little boy would soon return.

Towards the end of September a visitor called at Chantry Hall. His name was Stuart Winstanley, and he was an official from the Education Authority in Leeds. He was extremely interested, he said, by the article in the press about the brilliant James Stratton. Indeed, the entire board of the Authority had been very much impressed. It was quite remarkable, of course, that James had educated himself just with the help of the family library. But it must be appreciated that this was not enough. Surely Mrs Stratton must know that if her school-age son was not attending school, she must provide adequate education at home, conducted by a fully qualified teacher.

Surprisingly, Rosalie agreed with everything Winstanley said. In her opinion to have a brilliant child was much more difficult than to have a backward one. She found it impossible to handle James, and so had the string of tutors she had employed during

the past few years, before James had taken his education into his own hands. Perhaps Mr Winstanley could help to find the right tutor to tame her difficult son.

Ten days later, Lettice died, just as she had lived during the past fifteen years – with a bottle of gin in her hand. It was impossible to let the undertakers enter her squalid room, so Amos and Rosalie dragged her huge swollen body on to the dining-room table. Sick with the stench of drink and vomit, Rosalie washed the inflated blue face with a wet towel. She covered the grotesque figure with a venetian lace cloth that Desmond Winwood had given to his wife many years ago.

The family doctor wrote the death certificate between two large glasses of whisky. Amos put the three remaining dogs in Lettice's French hatbox and took them to the vet, to be put to a well-deserved sleep.

Lettice was buried in a satin-lined coffin, side by side with her husband in the sumptuous marble tomb that had been built for them in the village cemetery. The nurse, riding high on the waves of neat gin, was taken as a private patient in an alcoholic clinic in Surrey. Two hippies, who were camping in the derelict stables, were paid a good deal of money to carry out everything from Lettice's rooms and burn it in the grounds.

Chantry Hall belonged to Rosalie already, and according to a codicil made in a rare moment of soberness, she inherited the rest of her estate as well. How many more jungle trips for Anthony, she thought, as the solicitor read the will.

'You are a very rich woman now, Rosalie,' Amos told her. 'And it is almost certain that James is now your only child; you are responsible for his future. As a start, you ought to engage a tutor. He can't be left alone just fiddling about with toads and frogs in the Tower. It isn't normal.'

Rosalie agreed. She went straight to tell James, who was at work in the laboratory. Surprisingly, he did not object.

'I want a female tutor, Mother,' he said. 'It is more friendly and fitting, I think. Get somebody young and well-groomed, with her own teeth and short nails. And please, not before Christmas, as I want to finish the work I am doing on a whole family of lizards, caught just before hibernation. They are especially beautiful at that time.'

By the end of September, life at Chantry Hall resembled the

heaviness of an old ship weighted down by a heavy cargo. Nanny hardly ever left the nursery, knitting cardigans and socks for Stevie, and keeping the lights burning for him all through the day and night. James divided his time between the laboratory and the library, with an occasional hunting trip for a sleepy lizard. The red Ferrari stood silently in the garage, for Rosalie had given up her wild drives across the moors and spent her days reading alone and her nights with Amos. His solemn soundless lovemaking had a balsamic effect on her troubled mind.

There was no news from Anthony. It seemed that his beloved untamed lands had claimed him for ever.

In mid-October, Mr Winstanley from the Education Authority in Leeds telephoned the Hall. After a long search, he said to Rosalie, they had found a young lady teacher who was willing and interested to take on the tutoring engagement in the lonely moor mansion. Miss Lacey Dawson was a qualified teacher with quite a few years' teaching experience in grammar schools. She had spent the last eight months as assistant headmistress at a select boarding school for girls in Hampshire, but had given up the post for private reasons and was extremely interested in the proposed appointment at Chantry Hall. Winstanley suggested an early interview at the Hall, but Rosalie was against the idea.

'You see, Mr Winstanley, if people come for an interview, they want time afterwards to think things over. I am very keen for James to start proper study as soon as possible. Let Miss Dawson come in the New Year, say on the 10th of January, to start the job. She can always leave at any time should she wish to do so. Until then, my solicitors will pay her a retaining fee of fifteen pounds a week.'

Rosalie told Amos.

'Let me check her references,' he said.

'It's all arranged,' said Rosalie, quelling him with a forbidding glance. 'We'll decorate Aunt Lettice's apartment and get modern furniture and bathroom fittings. And colour television of course.'

Despite her deepening grief over Stevie, Rosalie was preparing for Christmas. It was the most cherished part of the year for her, and the Hall was usually superb in the Christmas atmosphere. Surprisingly, James too took an interest in the preparations.

'Let's make it a great Christmas, Mummy,' he told her. 'Perhaps it will bring Stevie back. We must dress a special tree for the nursery, with lots of lights and buy him a lot of presents. Just as if we were sure he would come back on Christmas Eve.'

He went with Rosalie in her red Ferrari to all the shopping centres of Yorkshire, and made her buy masses of toys for Stevie.

'He has become quite obsessed with his little brother,' she told Amos, after returning from one of the trips.

'Perhaps he loved him more than we realized,' said Amos.

Nanny fully agreed with the plans. She decorated a small tree with silver stars and shimmering bells, hung up a huge stocking crammed with toys and sweets on the cot, and laid the table with special Christmas pottery. James brought in a bundle of toys.

Nanny came into the dining-room shortly before dinner on Christmas Eve, to bring her presents to the rest of the family. She was going to eat in the nursery and remain there for the rest of the evening. James came in just in time to receive his gift, a knitted tie and matching socks.

'Nanny, you have very trendy ideas,' he told her, kissing her fat red cheeks. The old lady left the room quietly, and climbed slowly up the carved staircase. She had left the nursery door open, and the lights on the Christmas tree shone warmly towards her. The aroma of the chocolates, oranges and dates that were piled high under the tree floated in the air. She entered the room and felt her feet growing deeply into the carpet. Her arms hung limply at her side. Stevie was sitting in his old pushchair, dressed in the pale blue jockey suit, with the green satin cap pulled firmly down on his shiny brown hair, and his hands folded in his lap. The pushchair stood close to the Christmas tree and the little chap seemed to look at it with a fixed, unsmiling gaze. Nanny did not move for a long time. The television in the drawing-room was turned on full volume, and was sending carols round the house.

Stevie had come back. And he was dead. Nanny realized that after an unmeasurable length of time. She closed the nursery door and went across the landing. She stood there silently, gripping the banister with unfeeling hands. And suddenly, from somewhere deep in her short plump body, came a direful scream.

Rosalie was just pouring out some wine to drink with the

meal. She dropped the bottle with a crash and went running into the hall, followed by Amos and James. Nanny Donnan stood at the top of the stairs, arms outstretched, screaming. Suddenly she dipped to her knees and started to roll down the stairs, gathering speed and bouncing higher and higher, until she reached the bottom and landed in the middle of the hall. She lay there, face down, a trickle of dark blood escaping from under her chin. Amos knelt at her side.

'I think she's broken her neck,' he said.

'Don't touch her,' screamed Rosalie. 'I'm going to call the doctor.' She moved towards the drawing-room where the telephone was. The television carols had changed into a melodic bell-ringing. She switched off the set.

'She's gone,' Amos told James, as he felt for Nanny's pulse. The boy was staring fixedly at the quickly forming pool of blood by Nanny's head.

'The doctor is out on a call,' Rosalie said. 'His wife will try to locate him and send him over as soon as possible.'

'Something must have terrified Nanny upstairs. Let's go and see,' said Amos. They mounted the stairs; James was a few steps behind. The nursery door was closed. The tinsel and holly around it looked somehow forbidding.

As Amos pushed open the door, Rosalie grabbed instinctively for his hand. James remained just below the top of the stairs. The shiny tree was lit up with dozens of tiny lights. The rocking horse stood close to the old pushchair. The large centre lamp shone down on the gaily dressed boy. Amos's grip tightened on her hand. She did not scream, did not move, but just stood there, close to Amos. They both heard James enter the nursery.

'How do you like my Christmas surprise? I told you Stevie would be back.'

Rosalie looked at him. Was the boy mad? He crossed the room and turned the pushchair round so that the little boy was in full view. His head had shrunk, but all the same it was Stevie's face. The lips were slightly apart, showing the edge of his teeth. His eyes were wide open, the cornflower blue changed to an inky shade. The skin was brownish, almost suntanned. His hair was amazingly alive, thick and shiny like wet chestnuts. Still Amos and Rosalie did not move or speak. The sound of the brass doorbell rang through the house.

'The doctor,' said Rosalie, remembering the heap of Nanny's body in the hall.

'We shall have to tell him and call the police,' warned Amos. James stood silently, one hand on his dead brother's shoulder, gazing into his mother's eyes.

'We can't, Amos,' Rosalie whispered. 'Not without Anthony being here to tell me what to do.'

'But it may be weeks or months before he comes home again.'

'He is his son. He must decide.'

The bell rang again, more urgently. Rosalie and Amos left the nursery and came down the stairs.

The doctor turned Nanny on her back. Her face, framed with grey hair, was squashed in a grotesque manner. The coalesced blood formed a macabre pattern.

'How did it happen?' he asked.

Amos looked at Rosalie, but she avoided his eyes. 'We were having our Christmas dinner downstairs, when we heard her scream. She was coming down the stairs to join us, but she must have slipped.'

James stood at the landing looking down. The first lie concerning Stevie's homecoming had been told.

'She's broken her neck,' said the doctor. 'I'm certain that the autopsy will prove that she suffered a heart attack on her way downstairs. The fall was a consequence of that.'

While the doctor telephoned for the ambulance and police, Rosalie slipped upstairs. On the landing, James put his arms round her.

'Don't panic, Mother. The police can come up here should they want to. Stevie isn't there anymore.'

'Where is he?'

'In his own quarters. You will hear all about it as soon as you have time.'

The ambulance and the police arrived simultaneously. 'You're having a rough time, Mrs Stratton,' said the constable, remembering the search for Stevie.

In the dining-room, Amos poured a whisky for the doctor.

'Rotten thing to happen at Christmas,' the doctor said. 'Perhaps the sentiment of the season had something to do with it.'

'Perhaps,' answered Rosalie.

The doctor and police completed all the formalities and left Chantry Hall. Rosalie and Amos returned to the dining-room.

The aroma of the spilt wine from the broken bottle mingled with the smell of burning logs. Suddenly as she looked at the oblong table, laden with traditional lace and silver, she remembered the monstrous shape of Lettice resting there not long ago. And now Nanny. And Stevie. For the first time in her life she felt the slow ascent of fear inside her, from her toes up to her hair.

The old iron clock in the yard chimed ten times. The windows of James's laboratory in the Tower blazed in the night.

'He's waiting for us,' Amos told Rosalie. 'Let's go.'

Hand in hand, they made their way towards the Tower. Amos opened a heavy door, and behind it spiralled a flight of stone stairs. They ascended slowly, their footsteps echoing behind them. Reaching the top, they paused for a moment, looking to each other for assurance. Amos led the way down the corridor.

James was standing in the open doors of his laboratory. He was wearing dark velvet slacks and a matching tunic, trimmed with beaver. His dark hair, with its slightly curling fringe, completed the Renaissance look. He stood aside as they entered the laboratory. In the strong light that flooded the room the toads and lizards in the glass cabinet seemed almost alive. The sterile atmosphere cut deep into Rosalie's heart.

'Come into my sitting-room,' said James, and he led them to a corner, furnished with a low table, two armchairs and a settee. A basket on wheels, usually used for fire logs, was full of books and scientific magazines. On the wall were two pictures, primitively framed. 'Giuliano Medici,' James said, introducing the pictures, 'almost my brother, you may think. And this is Cesare Borgia.' He pointed to the other picture.

'The greatest monster of his time,' said Amos.

'Perhaps,' said James, 'but most of all he was a great power.'

'Where did you get the pictures from?' his mother wanted to know.

'From a book in the library.'

'And this furniture?'

'From the attic. There's a lot more up there that I want to use. I am planning a small apartment up here. Since the central heating was installed up here, the place has become quite cosy.'

Rosalie felt that the animals in the cabinet were staring at her

across the room and turned her chair away from them. James smiled.

'I suppose that you have come here to talk about Stevie.'

'That's right. Where is he?'

'In his own quarters. I'll fetch him.'

He went to the opposite corner of the room and pressed one of the stones in the wall. A square block, high as a man, turned half a circle, revealing a small windowless chamber. 'The Tudors knew how to build secret retreats,' said the boy. 'There is also a hidden passage leading from here straight on to the landing in the house.'

At the sound of the wheels Rosalie left her chair and sat down close to Amos, on the settee. James wheeled Stevie carefully towards his mother. She closed her eyes.

'You had better have a good look at Stevie, Mother. I think he looks grand. And he's here to stay. He's come home for good.'

Slowly she opened her eyes, and looked at the boy. His eyes were remarkably preserved, only darker than in life. The face had retained its childish features. She had a strange sensation that he knew he was close to his mother.

'Why did you do it?' she asked.

'To preserve Stevie at his most lovable. If he had grown up, you would have lost him to his own life. You have never been attached to me, but I knew your love for Stevie. I wanted to give him to you for ever.'

Rosalie was silent. Amos looked at the portrait of Cesare Borgia, seemingly smiling over James's head. They are the same kind of monsters, he said to himself. James was trying to win his mother over. He had murdered Stevie as his crowning subject for his obsession with mummies.

'Did you practise on toads and lizards with the final aim of mummifying your brother?' he asked.

'Not at the beginning,' he said in a lecturing tone. 'Last summer I caught a baby lizard and it turned out to be a perfect mummy, young and beautiful for ever. I showed it to Stevie, and seeing them both together I realized I must preserve him too.'

'We must know the full story,' Amos said. 'It will help us to decide what to do with you.'

'What is there to be done with me?'

Rosalie sent a warning glance towards Amos. Whatever his motives, she thought, we must handle him carefully, and keep him undisturbed until his father comes home.

'How did you . . . How did you . . .?' she couldn't bring herself to ask the question.

'You want to know how I killed Stevie?'

'Yes. I want to know everything. It will be gruesome, but I know how he lived and I must know how he ended.'

James sat down, moving the pushchair closer to his side. In a sleepy monotonous voice, as if reading a story, James told the silent pair on the settee how he had planned step by step the mummification of his tiny brother. He had decided on the method used for the boy Pharaoh Akhenaton of the New Kingdom. He had spent days in the library studying every detail about the Pharaoh's preservation for eternity. In the attic he had found two large Victorian dolls and had practised the marking of the lines beneath the ribs on them. While his mother was shopping in the boutiques in York, he went to an old pharmacist to replenish his stock of the exotic oils and ointments. He had shown the old man his expertly preserved giant toad, Tuthmosis. He still remembered the astonishment registered on his face.

All the time Rosalie sat with eyes closed, bracing herself for the imminent description of how little Stevie had died. Amos Hawk's face was an unmoving mask. James continued the recital of his macabre tale. He had chosen September 9th as the day to kill Stevie. He knew that on that day after the nursery lunch Nanny Donnan was going to the village harvest fête. He had long discovered the chamber and the secret passage between the Tower and the landing in the house. Therefore it was possible to enter Chantry Hall and the nursery without being seen. He woke Stevie up and told him that his father was flying home as he had promised and would be landing up in the moors in a short time. It had only taken minutes to dress the little boy in his blue jockey suit. Together they ran through the passage into the Tower and without stopping, he shoved Stevie into the secret chamber and swung shut the stone wall behind him.

James looked at his mother and asked: 'Shall I go on?'

Rosalie Stratton tried to separate her locked hands, but could not. She nodded silently. James progressed to describe how he checked all the prepared instruments and substances. He

assumed that thirty minutes in the airtight chamber would be long enough for the tiny life to extinguish. He knew that he must move quickly, before rigor mortis set in. He carried Stevie and put him on the table. He was still warm and his eyes were wide open. James secured the eyelids with sticking tape to prevent them closing and undressed the boy. He marked a line on the left flank just beneath the ribs, made an incision, sponged the blood and removed the entrails, lungs and kidneys. He then cut out the heart and placed it in a glass jar filled with a solution of natron which should preserve it for many years.

James admitted that the handling of the brain was a problem. According to the Akhenaton method, the brain was extracted by a crooked instrument through the nose. He did not wish to use that system, fearing that it might ruin Stevie's face. He adopted a second method of filling the cavities of the skull with cedar oil which dissolves soft tissues in thirty days. Of course for this method he had to fracture the tiny skull to get the oil in.

Rosalie seemed to be fainting. Amos put his arms around her and lifted the limp woman back on the settee.

'It will soon be over, Mother,' said James, with an absolute absence of feeling. And he went on to say in detail how he had cleaned the inside of Stevie with diluted natron and packed it with wads of linen and resin and casein. He stitched up the incision and washed the whole body and face with myrrh. After dressing Stevie in his gay jockey suit, he had wrapped the body from head to toe in linen bandages. He had found the pushchair in the attic and had it ready to put Stevie in as he wanted him to be in a sitting position – so much more natural, he thought. Then he had locked the pushchair traveller in the airtight chamber where he had remained until the 20th of December.

It was terribly hard, James told them, not to go and see how Stevie was doing during all the weeks. But that would have spoiled the process. Because the boy was small and absolutely without fat, he considered that three and a half months in the airtight chamber should be long enough. If anything went wrong with the mummification, Stevie would have stayed in the chamber for ever. Never to be found, as nobody knew of its existence. But, as he unwound the linen bandages, Stevie appeared almost alive. Obviously the cedar oil had destroyed the brain and the soft parts, and the flesh had dried away. Only the skin and bones were left, preserved with ultimate perfection.

Consequently, sitting in his pushchair, or any other chair, Stevie could take part in the daily life at Chantry Hall.

Rosalie was numb. Amos was horrified but retained his alertness. 'How did Stevie's cap get on the moor?'

'I took it there on my bicycle the second night that he was missing. I had located the spot some days ahead, and I went out by the back door of the Tower. I wanted the cap to be found during the second day of the search. I considered it good timing.'

Rosalie Stratton stretched her legs stiffly to their full length, folded her arms and let her head drop back, resembling a puppet without strings.

'What do you propose to do now?' she asked her son.

'Just live as we've always done, now that we are all together again.'

'You can't live with a dead child in the house,' Amos Hawk said.

'He is not dead,' James said hotly. 'The spirit never dies as you know, and he is with us in his physical being as well.'

'I am terribly tired,' sighed Rosalie. 'We'll talk again tomorrow.'

As she rose from the settee, with Amos's help, she stood for a moment looking at the small figure, so horribly gay in its jockey suit. 'Good-night, Stevie,' she said in a whisper.

But James and Hawk heard it. There was a gleam on the boy's face. And Hawk was plainly shocked.

Next day Rosalie stayed in bed. In the late morning Amos came into her room.

'There is a lot to discuss,' he reminded Rosalie. 'Your weakness, for a start, has given James his first victory. Saying good-night to Stevie.'

'I couldn't help it. He looked as if he knew I was there.'

'That's just what James is hoping for. That we'll accept Stevie as he was before. It is all part of his evil scheme. You have to face it, Rosalie. Your son is a killer, a psychopath. He is ruled by a brilliant but perverted brain. And that's his perdition.'

'The only thing we can do now is to wait for Anthony. He is the only one to deal with the situation,' Rosalie told him.

'And what about the new tutor, Lacey Dawson? She is supposed to start her tutoring job here on January 10th,' Amos

reminded her. 'James is quite capable of insisting that Stevie take lessons with him.'

'You said that he is ruled by a brilliant brain. That's true. Consequently he will never do anything which would harm himself.'

The rest of Christmas and the days before New Year ploughed through Chantry Hall in deep furrows of sadness, fear and confusion. James insisted on bringing Stevie into the drawing-room in the afternoons. He carried him in his arms through the hidden passage from the Tower, across the landing and down the staircase. He put him in the deep armchair facing the windows and the thin stream of winter sunshine. He always kept a thick rug handy to throw over his tiny mummy, should the old cook appear unexpectedly in the room. He told his mother that he had discovered a way to change Stevie's clothes. It was a pity to have all the lovely garments hanging in the nursery unused.

On New Year's morning, James came to the drawing-room just before noon. Stevie, mummified in the sitting position, looked very comfortable in the crook of his brother's arm. Between his hands were stuck two New Year cards. 'One for each,' James told his mother and Amos. Sheepishly, Rosalie took one of the cards from the mummy's stiff hands. Amos went out of the room, ignoring his card. For a long time he stood at the window of his bedroom, staring blindly out. James was becoming quite obsessed with Stevie, he said to himself. The horror of Chantry Hall had started.

The morning of January 10th, 1971, was crisp and clear. Amos and Rosalie took the large station wagon to Yeadon Airport, to meet Miss Lacey Dawson.

'I still think it's a mistake to bring this woman to Chantry Hall,' said Amos. 'Sooner or later James will introduce her to Stevie. Imagine the consequences.'

'I had a long talk with James last night,' said Rosalie. 'He is now completely involved with Stevie. Regards him as his very own creation. He wouldn't do anything that might result in Stevie being taken away.'

The London plane arrived on time. There were only about twenty passengers, mostly businessmen with briefcases, so Lacey Dawson was easily spotted by Amos and Rosalie. She was rather

more elegant than Rosalie had expected, wearing a kingfisher-blue skirt and jacket trimmed with blue fox. Her hair was completely tucked inside a red turban, showing only a shiny, dark-brown triangle in the middle of her forehead. She had a full set of new luggage in dark green canvas edged with black patent leather, and a transparent case housing a fur coat. Amos met Rosalie's eyes over the roof of the station wagon. Rosalie knew that Amos distrusted people with brand-new suitcases. To smooth things over, she suggested lunch at a new restaurant in Leeds. There, Amos asked Miss Dawson for what reasons she had wanted to come to Chantry Hall.

'It is a very isolated place,' he said. 'Will you not feel lonely?'

She assured him that she would not. Altogether, she had had seven years of teaching in different schools, and she had now reached the point when she wanted a quiet, isolated job. 'Everyone comes to that point at one time or another in life,' she said.

'How much has Mr Winstanley told you about James?' asked Rosalie.

'He told me that your son is a child genius in every sense of the word.'

'He is also a problem child - geniuses are, you know,' Rosalie pointed out.

Miss Dawson was confident. 'I am certain I shall find a way with him,' she said. 'It is a challenge I am greatly looking forward to.'

When they reached Chantry Hall later that afternoon, Rosalie took Miss Dawson to her apartments, sumptuously converted from Aunt Lettice's rooms, and left her to settle in. She was to come down to the drawing-room at seven, to have a drink and meet her new pupil.

James had spent the afternoon stretched in front of the fire in the drawing-room reading a book about the Universe. He wore black velvet slacks and embroidered black velvet sandals. A pale blue shirt and heavy brocade waistcoat completed the much desired Medici style. He rose slowly to his feet when Amos ushered Miss Dawson into the room.

'This is James,' he said. 'And this, of course, is your tutor, Miss Lacey Dawson.'

They shook hands, and Amos poured sherry for everybody, including James. Lacey Dawson was immediately aware of the

young Stratton's likeness to the medieval princes, intensified by his visible efforts to dress like them. Over her sherry she studied his face, the exquisite chiselled features, the thick, heavy dark hair, the cold, forbidding eyes. She was certain that the brilliant brain attributed to him was vibrating with beastliness, chiselled as precisely as his face.

After dinner, she was shown the schoolroom.

'School hours can be arranged between you and James,' suggested Rosalie. 'He has a laboratory in the Tower and wants some time for that.'

'I understand,' said Lacey. 'We'll settle the times tomorrow.'

Later that evening, as she relaxed in a warm bubble bath, she assessed the situation at Chantry Hall. Most intriguing, she thought, nobody has as yet mentioned the little boy who disappeared from the place in September. And was there a Mr Stratton? And who exactly was Amos Hawk, so solemn and so obviously mad about Rosalie Stratton? Her employer was decidedly beautiful, sensual, acquainted with life from every angle – independent, rich, generous. And James, a Medici and Borgia of the 1970s: brilliant, ruthless, perverted, doomed. It seemed that she had come to the right place. Obviously, they did not read the Hampshire local papers. They did not know her connection with the suicide affair at the Mount Avrille Young Ladies' Boarding School. Dear Stuart Winstanley, she thought. For a few afternoons of sweaty, clumsy love-making he had paid her back in the glowing recommendations he had made first to the Hampshire school and now to Mrs Stratton.

Lacey Dawson reached for the glass of cool white wine standing on the tray fixed across the bathtub. Just the place to sit the storm out, she thought smugly. Of course, she would be completely cut off from Lambert for at least six months, but that was all part of the scene.

It took more than two weeks to establish a routine with James. In the first days he was showing off his sagacity, jumping with acrobatic ease from the subject of the Universe to macrocosm, terrestrial surface, money power, the Renaissance, Ancient Egypt and the mating habits of dragonflies. He took her to his laboratory in the Tower and was ecstatic at her unconcealed amazement at the strange, perfectly preserved dynasties of toads, lizards and frogs. Finally, they agreed that school hours would be between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. After lunch, an hour

of walks or tennis in the grounds. The rest of the day was James's, for whatever he wanted to do.

February arrived with frosty snowstorms. Early afternoon hung over the house like a torn canvas dome. Amos and Rosalie had gone to Leeds. James was in his laboratory and Lacey was in the library, looking through first editions of the works of the Brontës. Bored, she decided to take the opportunity of exploring the house. She went up the heavy, carved staircase. A row of dove-grey doors stared at her. Two rooms were firmly locked, but the doors of the remaining four opened under the pressure of her hand. Amos Hawk's bedroom – severe, colourless, tidy; James's – full of scattered garments, Renaissance reproductions on the walls. The master bedroom was lush, opulent, the atmosphere penetrated with the scent of wild flowers and Rosalie Stratton's own, living warmth. At the far end of the landing, a white door, painted with forest animals, led to the nursery. Lacey Dawson stopped.

Through the door, James's voice could be heard talking to someone. After a pause, a muffled croak answered him. Then there was a strange, squeaking laughter. Lacey opened the door just enough to see inside. The room was bright, alight with the winter sunshine. James was sitting in a deep armchair, close to the window. On his arm sat a child-size doll, dressed in pale blue boy's clothes, with a green cap on thick hair. A ventriloquist's dummy, Lacey Dawson said to herself. James is trying to learn the trick. She entered the nursery and crossed the room close to James before he noticed her.

'I can teach you a lot about that,' she said. 'As a child I had a ventriloquist's dummy and was taught by a local professional.'

James looked at her in silence for a long while. His brain was racing to reach a decision. Should he tell his tutor the truth, or leave her to believe, for the time being, the dummy version?

Lacey Dawson reached the same decision. As she spoke, she realized that the dummy was the lost little boy, Stevie. The discovery pleased her tremendously. It meant that she had Rosalie Stratton and Chantry Hall firmly in her hands. James agreed to afternoon ventriloquist lessons in the Tower laboratory, and before long they constituted a large part of his tuition. James was soon fully aware that Miss Dawson knew the truth about Stevie, but felt that the mutual pretence was best at the moment.

James progressed extremely well with his ventriloquism. He had achieved the art of speaking in a clear, child's voice. The laughter sounded natural. They planned a surprise entertainment with the 'dummy' for Mrs Stratton's birthday in March.

Lacey's interest in James was not bordered by general tuition and the secret sessions in ventriloquism. His uncanny handsomeness awoke a dangerous, cold desire in her. She steered the history lessons in James' favourite field – the Renaissance. They discussed in full the sexual habits of the Borgias, where intercourse was preferred with sons, daughters, brothers and fathers. By the time the lesson ended with the violent incest between Cesare and Lucrezia, James was only a few days away from her bed. It was easy to get to her ground-floor apartment through the narrow corridor connecting the Tower with the house. James was known to work in his laboratory sometimes well into the night. All he had to do was to leave the light on and slide into her rooms.

In bed he was like a young circus animal, learning new tricks every day. Lacey was a very advanced performer with the cruel streaks of a lion tamer. The combination of the secret of Stevie and the liaison with James strongly appealed to her criminal mind. Besides the ecstasy, there was the growing power of her grip on Chantry Hall and everything and everyone it represented. She was experienced enough not to trust Lambert, the man connected with the Hampshire affair, completely. She believed strongly in always planning, in any circumstances, the next step. She was wise enough not to cast even one sideways look at Amos Hawk. He was strictly Rosalie's, and she held them both in her claws.

Amos was aware of the new atmosphere between James and his tutor. He was puzzled, too, by her rather prolonged visits to the Tower laboratory. He invited Stuart Winstanley to meet him for lunch at a restaurant in Leeds, determined to find out more about the woman. After an elaborate meal, peppered with light conversation, he came to the point.

'I wish to know all about Miss Lacey Dawson.'

Mr Winstanley almost dropped his frosted glass, brimming with green Chartreuse. 'Is something wrong?' he managed to ask.

'A lot,' Amos Hawk told him. 'I am certain that you did not give us the full picture of her. Especially the reason why she left the Mount Avrille Boarding School.'

Mr Winstanley tugged at the pink carnation in his button-hole. He took a sip of Chartreuse, and began to talk. He had been headmaster of a grammar school in Whitby when Lacey had been taken on as a junior teacher. They had had a brief affair. At the end of the school year Lacey had left the school, and the year after that Winstanley had been appointed to the Education Authority in Leeds. A few years passed. Suddenly, out of the blue, she had reappeared and demanded a reference from him. A top-class girls' boarding school in Hampshire had a vacancy for an assistant headmistress and she wanted the job. If he didn't help her, she would tell his wife of their affair. Winstanley was sure his wife would never let him forget it.

'What happened then?'

Some months later, he had had a surprise visit from the headmistress of the school. Lacey was apparently having a lesbian affair with one of the pupils, a young heiress called Lucinda Brookes. When the headmistress had tried to throw Lacey out, she had threatened to create a terrible scandal.

He had hesitated for a month. He had been aware of what the consequences might be if he had interfered in Lacey's affairs. When he had finally decided to act, it had been too late. Lucinda Brookes had committed suicide. Her body was kept in the mortuary icebox for three weeks until her father came home to bury her.

Winstanley added: 'Lacey Dawson left the school immediately after the girl's death and went abroad. When she returned, she contacted me again.'

'And you recommended her to us?'

'She didn't give me a chance. She was all set to go and see my wife, although the affair was years ago.'

'Well,' said Amos, 'I won't ask you to get rid of her for me. I won't involve you at all. I'll do it myself.'

Amos thought things over while driving home from Leeds. The outstanding feature was the fact that the young girl was an heiress and her father would inherit the fortune if she died. His mind worked slowly but precisely. Could Lacey Dawson have induced the girl's suicide? He was determined to find out.

The next day, Amos suggested that Rosalie should take Lacey Dawson on a shopping trip; Rosalie agreed, and took her shopping the following day. At the last moment James decided to

join them on the trip to wintry Scarborough. Rosalie proposed lunch at the great seafront restaurant and a film afterwards. That gave Amos almost the whole day alone at Chantry Hall.

As soon as they had left, he entered Lacey's apartment. Obviously she was a tidy, methodical person. Amos realized that he had to try and remember precisely how and where things were. Lacey might notice the slightest change in the outlay of her belongings. Where would a woman of her kind hide documents and important items? He walked from one room to the other, scrutinizing each object. He felt that Lacey Dawson's secret was almost touching his hands. Again, he went round the two rooms. He stopped, noticing a large vase, cut from one block of thick black glass, which stood on a low table in a corner of the bedroom. Exquisitely made outsize paper anemones, in all shades of blue, were arranged in a precise cluster.

If there was anything Lacey was hiding, Amos was sure it was inside that vase. He stood for a few moments, trying to remember the layout of the paper flowers. To his surprise he discovered that the flowers were tucked in a wire base, which he lifted easily from the wide neck of the vase. There was a layer of black tissue paper, and underneath it a square packet, neatly wrapped in black paper and tied with black string.

Amos looked at his watch. It was exactly 1.15; Rosalie, Lacey and James would be having lunch in Scarborough. Time was on his side.

He took the black parcel into the drawing-room, where he opened it carefully. About thirty closely typed sheets of paper were folded inside, some newspaper cuttings, and an envelope. The envelope contained a photograph of a young girl, perhaps less than fifteen years old. She was not pretty, not even plain. She was ugly. A long face with slightly hollow cheeks, thin lips barely covering tiny, mouse-like teeth; the eyes almost round, sitting closely to the nose. Her hair was tightly drawn from the forehead and tied up with a ribbon bow. Across her frilly blouse was written in a large, childish hand: 'To Lacey, the only one, for ever - Lucinda'.

Amos got into the station wagon and drove to the village, blessing Mrs Armitage, the progressive librarian, for installing a photostat machine in the library. Within an hour he took two copies of each of the thirty typed sheets and the cuttings. Back at Chantry Hall, he went to Lacey's room and replaced the

papers and the envelope, wrapped in the black paper and tied with the black string, inside the vase. Carefully he pushed in the cluster of anemones.

At 3.15 precisely he poured himself a large whisky and settled in the deep armchair close to the fireplace. The logs were burning with a friendly crackle. Outside the windows, the February afternoon stood still. Amos started to read the photostat copies. It was not a diary, more like a short story, with a few dates underlined on some pages. Lacey had recorded every detail of her deeds, in a meticulous and thorough manner. The story started when Lacey was on holiday in Spain the year before. She had met Lambert Brookes, a rich widower just back from a business deal in Kuwait, in the bar of his four-star hotel. After a lot of iced rums they had ended up spending the night together in his hotel suite. Their minds had clicked as completely as their bodies, and within a week they had hatched the death of his unfortunate daughter Lucinda, from whom Lambert would inherit a fortune, should she die. The plan was not to murder the girl, but to engineer her suicide, which in Lacey's view was a much neater and safer idea. She would find herself a teaching post at a girls' boarding school, and Lambert would in due course send Lucinda there, as a pupil. It would be Lacey's business, by playing on the girl's timidity, lack of self-confidence, and loneliness, to get the girl infatuated with her. At first Lacey would pretend to reciprocate the girl's feelings, and then she would quite suddenly, and with no explanation, drop her. The most probable outcome was suicide. Six months after Lucinda's death, Lacey would receive £50,000 from Lambert's inheritance, and would join him, if he wished, anywhere in the world.

On her return to England Lacey paid a visit to Winstanley, and as Amos had already heard, blackmailed him into securing her the job at the Mount Avrille school. Lucinda arrived a few months later: she was an easy, pitiful subject, ugly, ungainly, hungry to be loved. With a few smiles and kind words, Lacey soon had the girl where she wanted her. Her hot moist eyes would fasten on her teacher's face as she sat behind her desk in the schoolroom. When Lacey offered to give her private English lessons in the evenings, she had jumped at the chance. In the seclusion of her own room, it was not long before she brought Lucinda into her bed.

Lacey was strictly a man's woman. The mere thought of

physical contact with another woman made her feel ill. However, she had written, fifty thousand pounds was a lot of money, and any way to get it was, in her view, justifiable.

The girls at Mount Avrille started to notice Lucinda's infatuation with her teacher, Miss Dawson recorded. During the second week of May the rumours about Lacey and Lucinda had reached the Matron's ears. Lacey was summoned to the Matron's office. Is there any truth, she wanted to know, in the rumours that Miss Dawson is having a lesbian affair with her pupil, Lucinda Brookes? Lacey told her that Lucinda had the usual crush on her as her teacher. If the Matron insisted, Lacey would stop the private lessons, but she would not take any responsibility for Lucinda's reaction to that. The Matron said that she accepted Miss Dawson's explanation. Next day Lacey told Lucinda about her session with the Matron. The girl was delighted to hear that her dear Lacey had stalled off the old cow.

The day after the Rose Festival, when rumours had been rife, the Matron summoned Lacey to her private apartment. She was afraid that the conversation would not be friendly and so preferred the seclusion of her own flat. Her fears proved justified. Lacey Dawson attacked from the start. The Matron should know that lesbianism is not an offence, not legally punishable. Should she be dismissed from her job at the Mount Avrille school, she would syndicate her story to the world press.

From that day, Lacey recorded, the events gathered speed. The Matron tried to contact Lambert Brookes, but was told that he was abroad for an indefinite time. She had travelled to Leeds to implore Mr Stuart Winstanley, as the sponsor of Miss Dawson, to persuade her to leave the school. The Matron even suggested a golden handshake for Miss Dawson and for Mr Winstanley, should he succeed.

Lacey Dawson had found out from the Matron's chauffeur about her visit to Leeds and her lunch with a short, plump gentleman with a red carnation in his buttonhole. She was certain that the Matron had asked for Winstanley's help in securing her dismissal. She was equally certain that dear old Stuart would not dare to try. The time had come to act, Lacey Dawson wrote in her record. Amos Hawk had another drink to sustain himself for the final revelation.

On July 1, Lacey Dawson was sitting in the corner of a large

sofa. At her feet on the shabby brown carpet, Lucinda lay, face down, writhing. Everything was finished between them. Lucinda pleaded and told Lacey that they could live together in her mansion in Dorset. When she was twenty-one she would be very rich.

'You do not understand, little sparrow,' Lacey told her. 'I do not love you any more. Don't want you any more. It was all a mistake on my part.'

'You must not leave me, Lacey, ever,' Lucinda cried, 'I will die if you do.'

For a long while Lucinda lay silent and motionless on the floor. Lacey recorded how she had a cigarette and watched the girl working up to the summit of frenzy, known by psychiatrists as the 'blue devils'.

When it came it was terrifying even for Lacey, as she admitted in her record. Lucinda started rolling on the floor, kicking her heels and knocking her head on the floor boards. She was violently sick and the sour odour of the vomit mixed with the fragrance of the rain-drenched roses which came through the windows, into a sickly effluvium.

Lacey Dawson ran to the Matron's office. She burst in without knocking, interrupting her session with the housekeeper.

'I have tried to meet your requests after all,' she told the Matron. 'I had Lucinda Brookes to tea in my rooms and told her that I will be leaving the school just before the holidays. Come and see the result.'

Lucinda was taken to the sick bay and the doctor was called. She had to be strapped to her bed for two days and kept under strong sedatives.

For two days afterwards the nurse told Miss Dawson Lucinda lay in her bed, straight on her back, gazing to the ceiling. She did not eat or speak, only drank a vast amount of orange juice. She insisted that she must go to the toilet, refusing violently to have the bedpan. She discovered that the night nurse was having an affair with the tennis coach. At that time, Lucinda was the only patient in the sick bay. The nurse was young, the time was July, the tennis coach was all man. It was easy for Lucinda to get the keys of the drugs cabinet from the nurse's uniform, hanging in the medicine room, while the nurse was engaged in private games behind the tennis changing rooms.

Lucinda Brookes had died of an overdose of barbiturates,

taken while the balance of her mind was disturbed, the Coroner had stated in his records, dated July 8th 1970.

The final entries in Lacey Dawson's records were brief. The inquest over, she booked for a cruise to the Seychelles, the islands fast becoming the vogue of the rich and the bored. After that Lacey said in the final line, she will have to find a 'pied à terre' to wait for the fruits of her arrangement with Lambert Brookes to 'ripen in a golden sheen.'

Back from Scarborough, Rosalie went straight into the drawing-room to join Amos. She had a stiff drink, and said, 'There is something I want to tell you, Amos. Perhaps I'm fussy, not quite with it. But when we were in the cinema I saw, most distinctly, James's hand nestling between Miss Dawson's thighs.'

'I'm not surprised,' he replied. 'He has been initiated by Miss Dawson in the past few weeks. You read this tonight' – he held up the photostats – 'and we'll have to move quickly before she discovers the truth about Stevie.'

Later that evening, Rosalie read through the manuscript. 'This is awful!' she cried to Amos. 'Terrible! Two murderers under one roof! What shall we do?'

They agreed that Lacey Dawson would have to be dismissed straightaway. The affair of James would have to be kept quiet if possible until Anthony Stratton came back.

At that very moment, Lacey was having a hot, scented bath in her apartment, and James was scrubbing her back. 'I don't think Cesare Borgia could have been as randy as you,' she told James, looking closely at the bulging spot between his legs under the tightly wrapped towel.

'He was degenerate, as history tells us,' James observed. 'And I would never go for my sister should I have one. I am satisfied with you.' He plunged his hands deep in the scented water and grabbed Lacey's pubic hair.

When he was leaving her room in the early morning light, he looked back at Lacey curled under the satin eiderdown. 'You were just the right person to come here, just at the right time,' he said. And he closed the door behind him.

Before lunch the next day, Amos went into the schoolroom. Lacey Dawson was sitting at her desk, alone, looking through some books.

'Good morning, Miss Dawson,' said Amos, closing the door behind him.

The young woman lifted her head. Her short, dark-brown hair glistened like spilled honey and her plum-blue eyes were large with surprise.

'Mr Hawk,' she said. 'An unexpected pleasure. An inspection about James's progress, I assume.'

'You may call it that,' Amos told her. 'His progress under your tuition has taken a course of which Mrs Stratton disapproves. She has asked me to terminate your employment at Chantry Hall. You will receive three months' salary and be given one week to leave.'

For a while Lacey Dawson observed the tall, lean man in silence.

'May I ask what course James's tuition has taken?' she asked.

Amos came closer to her desk. 'The course of moral vitiation of a young boy,' he said.

Her eyes shone with haughtiness. 'James has no age,' she said. 'He is brilliant, but dangerous and depraved. He needs somebody like me to keep him in some frame of lucidity.'

Amos decided to lay down his cards. 'I know all about the Mount Avrille affair,' he said. 'I know how and why Lucinda Brookes died.'

For a fleeting moment the woman reeled under the totally unexpected blow. Damn Winstanley. Damn the school. He must have got in touch with them. But then she remembered Stevie and a wave of confidence surged up inside her.

'Lucinda Brookes was a greatly disturbed child,' she said. 'She could not face life at all. When she finally realized that, she killed herself.'

'I know exactly why she killed herself, Miss Dawson. I advise you to leave Chantry Hall quietly, as suggested. In your own interest and that of Mr Lambert Brookes as well.'

Again, Lacey was shocked; but again she remembered Stevie. She stood up behind her desk.

'As you know, Mr Hawk,' she said, 'I do have intimate relations with James. I will have to discuss your suggestion about my leaving here with him. You are not just dismissing a tutor. You are trying to send away a person extremely important to him.'

'Your importance will cease the moment you leave here. You are just the first carnal experience of a precocious boy.'

'Some boys never forget their first experience, Mr Hawk. It remains inside them like a burning torch, as long as they live. James is one of those boys.'

'Apparently Lucinda Brookes carried a burning torch inside her too,' Amos said fiercely, 'but James would never take an overdose of barbiturates if you were to leave him. Be sure of that.'

Lacey Dawson almost choked with anger. She needed all her well-harnessed strength of willpower and resistance not to throw the truth about Stevie in his face. But she resisted, knowing that her vantage moment was near. She looked at her watch and said, 'Lunch time. And, as for my leaving here, whatever James and I decide, you will hear about it on the 16th of March.'

'That's Mrs Stratton's birthday,' he reminded her.

'I know,' she told him with a smile, and went out of the schoolroom.

Amos found Rosalie at the drinks table. 'How did it go?' she asked.

'Badly,' admitted Amos. 'Miss Dawson is sure of full support from James. She didn't make any blushing secret of the fact that her carnal relationship with him is her absolute security. She will discuss her dismissal with James and we will hear the result on your birthday.'

'They will tell us?' Rosalie was astonished.

'That's the score.'

'But we can't just let it all ride. We can't let her and that Lambert Brookes get away with their ghastly scheme.'

Amos almost smiled. 'We have no choice, Rosalie. For we are letting James get away with murder.'

Lunch was brief, the conversation supplied mostly by James and Lacey, who were arguing about the life-cycle of butterflies. Rosalie was going to Leeds in the afternoon and to avoid the atmosphere Amos decided to go with her.

As the red Ferrari swung out of the gate James and Lacey went to the nursery. The thick, fetid air of the unused room was almost touchable. Lacey drew the curtains apart and the meagre light of the February afternoon drifted in. Dust-sheets, like ghosts, clutched the furniture. James slid open the doors of the wardrobe, and Lacey was amazed to see its interior packed with boys' outfits of all colours and descriptions.

'Your mother must have loved that boy very much,' she said.

'Too much,' James told her. He ran his hands over the garments and selected an outfit covered by a plastic bag. 'This was to be Stevie's party suit last Christmas. Of course, he had disappeared by then. We'll take it.'

He slid shut the wardrobe door, and together they went through the secret passage between the house and the Tower. In the laboratory, James unwrapped the outfit. It consisted of long, cornflower-blue velvet trousers, a very pale blue satin shirt with lace-edged collar and cuffs, a pair of blue socks, and black patent leather shoes with silver buckles.

'Will you help me to dress the dummy?' asked James.

'I will help you to dress Stevie,' replied Lacey. 'I knew all the time.'

James burst out laughing. 'I knew that you knew,' he shrieked, 'but it was more amusing not to admit it.'

'Have you never wondered that I was not shocked by the discovery? That I never mentioned it to your mother or to Hawk?'

'No, Lacey, I did not wonder,' said James, looking more abhorrent than ever. 'I was aware that you came to Chantry Hall to hide from something. You needed the shelter of this isolated moor mansion to let things settle down. You gladly grabbed the hook I threw you, by pretending that Stevie was a dummy. As for Mother and Hawk, they have chosen to shield me until my father gets home. The quieter you kept, the deeper your heels dug in the safety of Chantry Hall.'

'They know that you have "carnal associations" with me, as Mr Hawk put it in a scholarly way,' said Lacey. 'He came to the schoolroom just before lunch and told me I must leave. I said that I would discuss it with you and we'd tell them on the 16th of March.'

'Yes. The Happy Birthday celebration,' said James, and he laughed.

'Let's dress Stevie,' reminded Lacey.

James went to the corner and pressed a button. The square block of stone turned slowly. He entered the small cubicle and lifted Stevie from his pushchair. Lacey switched on the lights in the laboratory and spread the garments on a table.

'I will have to take them all apart and sew them up on him,' she said.

James sat in an armchair with Stevie on his knee. In the cold

terms of assessment, the mummification was professional and perfect. Stevie's skin looked almost suntanned. His eyes, much darker than in life, were wide open and almost seeing. The hair was thick and shiny. The sitting position was most natural.

'Hurry up, Lacey,' James said in a clear, childish voice, turning Stevie towards her.

'That was perfect,' she acknowledged. 'I never knew Stevie's voice but that sounded definitely childlike and very clear.' She came close to James and cut the clothes off the tiny mummy. She pinned the satin shirt on to the stiff body and sewed it up. The long trousers were more difficult to put on, but finally that was done too. The blue socks and the buckled shoes completed the strange, compelling party outfit.

James seated Stevie on a table and supported him with a pile of books. For a while he observed him in silence.

'It is good to know,' he told Lacey, 'that Stevie will never leave me. I do not have anything or anybody, just him.'

Lacey was puzzled. She knew the lean, hard body of this disturbingly handsome boy intimately – but his mind had always escaped her. For her own dark purpose, she was determined to share Stevie with James, and never to let the boy establish any seclusion with his dead brother. It was not certain that Lambert would keep his part in their macabre deal. If he did not, Lacey was sure that her cosy future at Chantry Hall depended on her inclusion in the James-Stevie *ménage*.

The 16th day of March emerged from the moors wrapped in a gossamer of early frost. The sun, slow and hesitant, penetrated through Rosalie's bedroom window and reprinted the pattern of the lace curtains on the walls.

Rosalie sat up in the fourposter and remembered that she was forty-three years old. For a while she looked in a small hand mirror. Her large grey eyes travelled slowly over her face. Her skin was good, she thought, fresh and alive. Her hair, cropped in immaculate style, added a distinct air of youthfulness.

'You look great,' Amos told her as he emerged from the bathroom.

He handed Rosalie a small box, tied with a golden ribbon, a single purple orchid tucked in its loops.

'I know that you like your presents at the lunch table, but today I'd prefer to give mine to you now.'

Rosalie took the small box from him. 'I wish we could avoid lunch, Amos,' she said. 'I find it impossible to comprehend that my son and his tutor-turned-mistress are going to tell us what has to be done!'

'The whole situation at Chantry Hall is impossible,' replied Amos. 'But until Anthony comes back to sort it all out, we must try to carry on.'

Rosalie untied the ribbon and put the orchid in her hair. Inside the box was a golden bracelet, with a cluster of garnet flowers.

'It was my mother's,' said Amos. 'She gave it to me just before I left home.'

'What has made you part with it?' Rosalie wanted to know.

'I did not want just to go out and buy a present for you. I wanted to give you something that was truly and only mine.'

Rosalie held out her arm and Amos fastened the bracelet on her wrist.

'I'll always wear it in time of crisis as a shield,' she whispered.

For a long while she remained silent in his arms.

The old cook had laid the table in the dining-room with the best damask cloth, Wedgwood china and Victorian silver. At Rosalie's place she had put her gift – a lace basket of home-made frosted violets and mint leaves.

Amos and Rosalie entered the room together. Amos poured out two glasses of Hock and toasted her.

There was a rustling noise in the corridor. James wheeled Stevie into the dining-room; Lacey followed. They were all in party dress. Amos went behind Rosalie's chair and gripped her shoulders as James wheeled the pushchair up to the table. The party suit fitted Stevie remarkably well. Under his right arm was tucked a bunch of pink carnations.

'Happy birthday, Mummy,' said a voice almost identical to Stevie's.

It took a few moments for Amos and Rosalie to realize that it was James who had spoken. Lacey took the carnations from Stevie and handed them to his mother.

'You look lovely, Mummy,' the voice said.

Rosalie was frozen with shock. Amos was frozen with anger.

Lacey smiled. 'How is Stevie against Lucinda, Mr Hawk?' she said. 'You must admit we have the stronger hand.'

Amos realized why Lacey had suggested Rosalie's birthday as

the day of decision about her dismissal. Obviously, she was sure that Mrs Stratton could not dare to send her away with the ghastly secret of Chantry Hall in her full possession.

'I want Lacey to stay with me and James for ever,' the voice said.

Rosalie looked at Amos. They both knew that James meant to establish a household within a household: he, Lacey and Stevie, superior to themselves. He was certain that his mother would never give him up for the murder of Stevie – not now, after she and Hawk had shielded him since Christmas.

Amos said coldly: 'James, get Stevie out of here. Cook will be serving lunch in a few minutes.'

'I want to lunch with you, Mummy,' the voice said. 'And I want to see Cook. She loves me. She was always baking cookies for me.'

Amos poured a glass of brandy and told Rosalie to drink it up. She did, staring over the brim of her glass into the wide-open eyes of her dead son.

'I'll tell Cook to hold up lunch for half an hour,' Amos suggested. 'During that time, James, I want that mummy taken out of here.' And he left the room.

'Don't let that nasty man call me a mummy, James,' shrieked the voice in anger. 'Who is he, anyway?'

'He is supposed to be the estate manager, Stevie,' said Lacey.

Rosalie was close to fainting. 'Please, James, do as Hawk said,' she pleaded.

'No, Mummy, no,' cried the voice. 'Let me stay, I love you,' it added softly.

'I love you too – that makes two of us, Stevie,' said the voice of Anthony Stratton, as he came through the dining-room door, his arms full of the presents he had brought from far-off lands. Rosalie crashed to the floor, as white as a sheet.

It took two hours in the austere seclusion of Amos's room to acquaint Anthony Stratton with all the events at Chantry Hall. At the end of the macabre summary, the man who had for years roamed the world in a ruthless pursuit of untamed visions and primitive dreams, doubled up on the floor and wept.

The next day, Lacey demanded to speak to him. She was certain he had been fully briefed about the situation. She informed him that, in the circumstances, she and James felt that

it would be best for everyone concerned if the Tower were made habitable for themselves. All that was needed was an electric cooker and a bathtub. Anthony Stratton promised to see that this request was carried out straightaway.

'We have an insane son, Rosalie,' he said to his wife later. 'Until we decide what course to take, we must keep him quiet. That Dawson woman is watching her own interest, so she'll be careful not to give James away.'

He was right. Lacey would be more than careful. Only the day before, she had received an unsigned typewritten note, telling her to forget the Hampshire investment. Lambert Brookes had not kept his part in their deal. Most certainly he was by now somewhere where neither Lacey nor the law could reach. James, Stevie and Chantry Hall were the only security left to her now.

In a few days, a *ménage à trois* was established in the Tower. Anthony even arranged for the delivery of food and milk straight to the Tower back door, so James and Lacey – and Stevie – would be completely self-contained. In the Hall itself, the days passed slowly under the heavy burden. Anthony told Rosalie that it would take some time to decide what to do; for the time being they must just try to live.

April had arrived. Rosalie had changed. Her huge, grey eyes had lost the oyster-like lustre. Her pale skin showed her lack of sleep and inner restlessness. Amos spent his days in long walks across the moors. Only Anthony showed any hope. At the end of the month he suggested a weekend in Harrogate for the three of them.

'We all need a change,' he said. 'There's a good theatre and we can drink the spa waters. And, perhaps, we'll be able to get a new perspective on things at home.'

Amos agreed. It would also be a chance for the cook to visit her sister in Whitby.

Anthony reserved a suite at the Grand Spa Hotel. He said that Rosalie should drive Amos in her Ferrari, and he himself would follow in the station wagon.

The weekend came and was unexpectedly warm. Rosalie and Amos set out soon after breakfast; they would drop Cook at the Blue Coach Station for her trip to Whitby. Anthony promised to meet them at the Grand Spa Hotel in the early afternoon.

The house was silent as Anthony went upstairs across the

landing to the secret door to the Tower. He locked the door and put the key in his pocket. He went downstairs to the library, and from behind the thick curtains he took two large cans and carried them through the narrow corridor leading to the east wing entrance to the Tower. Making sure the door was locked, he went back to the library. Again, from behind the curtains he took a parcel wrapped in brown paper, and a bundle of straw. From a drawer, he took two candles and a box of matches. Silently he went down the long corridor. He opened the door to the Tower and carried in all the items he had assembled. The Tower was sunk in an absolute silence. He looked at his wrist-watch. It was precisely eleven o'clock. He knew that James and Lacey never rose before noon. And Stevie, of course, did not rise at all, he thought with a sinking heart.

Amos had given him precise descriptions of all the entrances to the Tower. Last night he had locked the back door leading to the moors, from the outside; having secured the secret entrance from the landing, now came the most important part of his plan. For years the ground floor of the Tower had been a store-room for all the overflow of Chantry Hall: old furniture, boxes, mattresses and toys were crammed together in a heap. Anthony unwrapped the parcel, took out two sets of explosives and placed them against opposite walls. He made two nests from the straw and put a candle in the middle of each, placing one nest at the bottom of the wooden stairs and the other on a large, woodworm-eaten table. Then he poured paraffin all over the amassed junk. Finally, he lit the candles and ran out of the Tower, locking the door behind him and taking the key. He put the empty cans in the garage and, without looking back, got in the station wagon and drove off.

Rosalie and Amos were waiting for him in the lounge of the Grand Spa Hotel. The afternoon was scented with freshly baked scones and warm honey. Amos had booked seats for the theatre that evening. Dinner was good, and after the theatre, Anthony suggested champagne in an intimate club he remembered from some years ago.

It was past midnight when they returned to the hotel. The receptionist had an urgent message for Anthony. It had been flashed on the television after the late news that Mr Anthony Stratton, spending the weekend somewhere in Yorkshire, was requested to telephone the police in Leeds.

Anthony went to the phone box while Amos and Rosalie waited in the lounge, wondering what was up.

'There's been a fire at Chantry Hall,' Anthony told them a few minutes later. 'And apparently an explosion in the Tower. Most of the house was also burnt down.'

'And James – and Lacey Dawson?' asked Rosalie.

'No trace of them. The firemen are still there. We'd better go back at once.'

Dawn was breaking over the moors as they arrived at Chantry Hall. There was a peculiar, smoky silence. The paneless windows of the Tower resembled the hollow cavities in a skull. The main house was almost destroyed.

The chief fireman came up to Anthony. 'A great tragedy, sir, Mrs Stratton. The inside of the Tower has completely burned out. All the Tudor beams and the wooden staircase and the top floor.'

'My son?' asked Rosalie.

'I'm afraid we found two charred bodies at the bottom of the Tower. And a twisted steel frame with wheels – an old pram, perhaps. That was all that remained from the top floor.'

'It seems there was a large explosion,' said a second fireman.

'Very likely,' Anthony told him. 'My son was always playing with death.'

'Who was the second person in the Tower?' asked the chief.

'Our son's tutor, Miss Lacey Dawson.'

'We have put what was left of the bodies in the hall in the main house. The police are there. Some formalities to be filled in.'

Anthony turned to Rosalie. 'You know the clause in the deed about Chantry Hall from Aunt Lettice. It seems that Fate has done that for you.'

He took his wife's hand and led her towards the Hall. Amos was left behind, looking at the Tower. The first light of morning seemed to be nestling in its crenellated top. Goodbye, Stevie, he said in his heart, and crossed the yard towards the house.

The island of the seals

It had been an unproductive day to say the least. The constant singing of the seals out in the bay had made her strangely restless, distracting her from the task in hand. Crumpled and discarded sheets of paper overflowed the wastepaper basket on to the surrounding carpet. She hadn't written one cohesive paragraph since morning.

Eventually, near dusk, she gave up all pretence of concentration and, crossing to the window, watched the sleek, grey bodies dipping and weaving far out in the still water. Like the legendary mermen of old, their tails and fins flashed in the gradually fading daylight. Mesmerized, she stared until the crescent moon began to rise and the vaporous tendrils of the sea-mist obscured them at their love-play.

When they were completely out of sight she turned away, carrying with her into the newly darkened room the sound of their shrill and melancholy keening.

The night air had brought with it a sudden chill and she shivered involuntarily, pulling her shawl around her. The isolation was beginning to get her down. She craved company. The stimulation of human conversation. She shrugged, pulling herself back from the edge of depression and, setting the kettle on the small hob, began to prepare her solitary evening meal.

Perhaps she would feel more 'inspired' when she had eaten.

She had just finished lighting the ancient and rather temperamental oil-lamp when the knock sounded lightly on the door. In the silence of the Hebridean evening it was like an atomic explosion and she froze in momentary shock.

At last, pulling herself together, she lifted the lamp high and moved across the small room to the half-door, a trail of grotesque, lengthening shadows draping themselves in folds of chiaroscuro like a train behind her.

She undid the latch with her left hand and opened the top section of the door to waist level, swinging it in towards her and peering, as she did so, out into the garden.

Silhouetted in the picture-frame shape stood a young man. About his head the swiftly rising 'ha', as the Islanders call the treacherous sea-fog, swirled like a horse's breath on a frosty day. Behind him the shingle path which led down to the beach lay shrouded in secrecy.

She judged that he was about twenty-four years old, tall and tanned, with thick, brown hair, sleek and shining as though damp from the sea. His eyes were brown too and fringed by dark lashes. But his most noticeable feature was the ears. Small for a man, they lay curled like fine pink shells, flat to his head.

He spoke, greeting her in the lilting tones of the 'Gaelic', with a voice that was at once soft and hypnotic. He wished her health and many blessings. He said he had seen her standing by the window and had been reminded how long it was since he had heard a human voice. And she, remembering that custom in the Islands demanded that hospitality be offered to anyone, friend or stranger, whom chance might bring to the door, bade him enter and sit awhile.

She gave him milk and oatcakes and they talked long into the night of many things. He knew much of the folklore of the outer isles, stories she had never heard before. The curious, soporific quality of his voice as he recounted to her magical tales of love and death lulled her into a semi-coma of contentment.

Sitting opposite to him in the flickering firelight seemed the most natural thing in the world, as though her whole life she had been expecting his arrival, as though for the first time in her drab existence she had found something worthwhile.

He reached forward to touch her hand and to her surprise she did not draw it away but curled her fingers around his and put her other hand up to stroke the thick dark hair and fondle the small, strange ears.

He looked at her long and deep, his eyes as dark and unfathomable as the rock-pools in the bay. She felt the blood rush to her face and her limbs took on a strange lightness as she read in his gaze the promise of an end and a beginning. She stood up, stumbling in her agitation, and he placed his hand on her arm to steady her. His grip sent a surge of feeling through her body which left her incapable of resistance as he led her gently through the open door into the tiny bedroom.

Next morning, when she woke to the sound of the soft, insistent chanting of the seals amongst the rocks, he had gone.

Only the mark of his head on the pillow remained to assure her that he had been there at all.

She waited for evening in a fine fury of apprehension, wishing the warm spring day away. Unable to concentrate on her writing she paced the room, hugging herself as the memories of the night flooded back in waves of emotion that made her head whirl.

By the time the sun had set, what remained of her pride was in shreds and when at last his light tap echoed on the half-door, she flung herself at him, crying in relief.

And it was as though he had never been gone, for he stilled her fears with his kisses, holding her in the circle of his arms until she fell asleep against his strong, dark body.

And so it continued all through the late spring and early summer, her love deepening and growing while in the background the ever-present seal colony thrived in the ripening sun.

In the beginning she questioned him about his daily absences but he only smiled and changed the subject, until eventually she began to accept his reticence as a fact of their life together and ceased her enquiries.

Every morning he had disappeared as usual and her days were her own. She had given up all pretence of writing now. Her sense of unreality in the daylight hours increased as the months went by. Her love had become an obsession and she lived only for the nights; existed simply for the return of her solitary, secret lover and their hours together.

To pass the time between sunrise and sunset she would take long walks along the beach where the seal community had their home. She watched the small, furry pups growing under their mothers' constant care, the great bulls fighting to retain their territory, the young males trying out their growing strength in mock battles.

She had an affinity with the seals that she had never had with her own kind. She had always been the outsider, a loner, considered slightly odd because she had no interest in the grasping opportunism that had overtaken humanity. It was one of the reasons she had begun to write. It gave her an excuse, a reason to enjoy her solitude unharassed by the predatory gossip that had hounded her schooldays and teens.

Now on the Island she had found the perfect balance. By day

the seals gave her friendship without intrusion and by night she loved and was loved in return. True, she wasn't doing any work but there would be plenty of time for that afterwards. And she didn't want to think of afterwards just yet. Even though she knew in her heart of hearts that somewhere, sometime, the magic summer would end.

It was the first week in September that the boat arrived, a powerful boat from the mainland carrying four powerful men. She watched them from the window as they landed and made camp among the rocks, covering the virgin shingle with a disorderly pile of accoutrements: tarpaulins and lengths of rope, a battered kettle, a primus stove.

They brewed some tea and sat in a circle drinking it and laughing together. Their harsh, mainland accents mingled with the intoxicating scent of the newly blooming gorse, to drift in through the open cottage window.

The tallest of the men stood up and bent over the fire to refill his cup. As he straightened the sun glinted briefly on the knife in his belt and behind her curtain she felt her skin turn cold with the realization of why they had come.

It was time for the 'culling'.

Somewhere, far away on the mainland, the 'Authorities' had decided that the number of seals must be kept strictly in check. Faceless men, who had never seen the colony, had condemned half of it to death.

And the four 'conservationists' before her would have paid well for the privilege of butchering hundreds of helpless, trusting mammals. For seal skins are valuable and the licence to 'cull' would be priced accordingly.

The four men finished their tea, throwing the dregs on the sun-bleached stones and stacking the plastic cups in an untidy heap by the primus stove.

Then they wiped their hands, rolled up their sleeves and systematically began to kill.

In the grip of a horrible fascination she watched as they skinned the half-grown pups and the young males. They worked methodically, their long-handled clubs rising and falling rhythmically, careful only to strike the head so that the pelt should not be damaged. Some they killed: the lucky ones. Some they skinned while they were only half-dead or stunned.

For two hours she gazed, ashen-faced, unable to tear her eyes away from the carnage. And all the time the pile of bloody skins mounted.

At last the 'head man' raised an arm elbow deep in gore to call a halt.

As though nothing had happened the evening sunlight continued to illuminate a beach littered with blood and viscera, like the aftermath of a great battle.

In the shadow of a large outcropping of rock a seal mother bent whimpering over what was left of her offspring. Nudging it gently with her flippers she tried to push the pathetic scrap of exposed muscle and sinew towards the safety of the sea.

The 'cullers' rinsed their carmine-stained hands and began to prepare an evening meal. They ate ravenously, totally oblivious of the devastation around them.

She turned from the window and lay down on the bed, her body weak with anguish and disgust. From outside she could hear the plaintive bleating of the seals punctuated by the coarse laughter of the men. And she wept with shame for humanity. For its needless cruelty and senseless greed. Wept until she had no more tears. Turning her face to the wall.

Gradually the sky darkened and the autumn evening closed around her. Exhausted by her distress, her eyelids began to droop over eyes ravaged by the afternoon's atrocities, and she drifted thankfully into oblivion.

She woke to total darkness. Total darkness and deafening silence. A pang of terror gripped her, followed by an overpowering sense of foreboding. For she was alone. Tonight when she needed his strength as never before, he hadn't come.

Feeling her way haltingly in the darkness she crossed to the window. The crescent moon hung almost obscured by the sea-mist.

It was a night like that first night had been. The only difference was that now and then the warning light of the alien boat blinked on and off, a pinpoint of scarlet through the silvery tendrils.

A primitive urge, stronger than she could contain, compelled her towards the beach. Lifting her shawl from where she had flung it earlier, she threw it round her thin shoulders and stumbled out into the mist.

The fog came and went in dense clumps as she picked her

way down the shingle path. She trudged on, completely losing her sense of direction, tripping on rocks, slipping on seaweed, only saved from occasionally walking into the sea by the cyclopean winking of the seal-cullers' light.

And with each step the feeling grew stronger. Terror and grief intermingled. Guiding her towards some nameless destination in the fog-wrapped shroud of the night.

The compulsion had been leading her on in this aimless semi-blind state for almost an hour when a huge rock loomed out of the mist in front of her. And there, in the lee of its overhang, she finally found him.

His naked shoulder, as she bent to touch it, felt cold and oddly sticky. Nauseated by the sensation she drew back her hand. It was covered in blood. She leant over to look more closely.

The back of his head had been battered to a pulp.

Controlling her repulsion with great effort she knelt down beside him and gently turned him over on to his back. The sudden shock of what she saw made her clamp her blood-soaked hand to her mouth in an attempt to still the hysterical screams which bubbled up in her throat threatening to engulf what was left of her sanity.

There wasn't an inch of skin left on him. Skin or hair. He'd been completely scalped and his ears had been cut off. The dark eyes that had looked at her with such love now stared up at her, glazed and unseeing in death.

The first wave of horror was superseded by an unimaginable grief. So deep and intense was the agony that she felt as though her body was being physically torn in two.

Gathering his flayed corpse to her chest she began to keen, a high continuous crooning moan. As her wailing mounted in pitch she started to rock, backwards and forwards, like a mother trying to soothe a fractious child to sleep. The tempo of her rocking increased and her tone took on a higher, whining quality as she pressed her face to what was left of his, heedless of the blood which stained her clothing and coagulated in her hair.

And as she wailed she began to hear, like an echo swirling through the mists over the still waters of the bay, soft voices raised to join in her lament. Comforting voices, whispering to her of the cool, green depths of the bottomless channel where

the seals forever glide among the swaying seaweed forests. Beckoning her to where the dark, limpet-encrusted rock caverns know no sound but the singing of a seal-maiden to her sleek, grey love. Calling her away from a world grown too terrible to bear. Welcoming her home.

She raised her head and ceased to rock, sniffing the air like a dog that has scented his prey.

Then her clouded eyes cleared and she smiled.

'Wait for me,' she called.

Then, bending tenderly to kiss the broken skull for the last time, she gently eased the tattered remains of her lost love on to the sand.

As she stood unsteadily to her feet the red light from the boat winked on and her bloodstained mouth glistened momentarily in the dark.

Absentmindedly she pushed her dishevelled hair away from her face and, clutching her shawl about her narrow body, she walked slowly and deliberately into the black, mist-enshrouded waters.

Notice in the *Edinburgh Examiner*

November 25th 1974

The inquest was held today on the death of Miss Moira Spencer, whose body was found last September washed up on the beach at Seal Island, the wild-life sanctuary in the Outer Hebrides.

Miss Spencer, who was fifty years old and a spinster, had taken a cottage for the summer on the otherwise uninhabited Island, to complete the writing of her current novel *The Seal People*. The book was to be based on the old legends incorporating the belief held by many Hebrideans, that the seals are an enchanted race who have the power to assume human form during the hours of darkness.

Miss Spencer's body, which was discovered by a group of 'cullers' working in the area, was thought to have been in the water several days.

She is survived by an elderly aunt.

Verdict: Death by misadventure

The atheist

The larder was bare, the grate without a fire, and outside the snow fell so deep that Padraig Flaherty could not even venture to open his front door. He sat by the empty hearth and stared through the television screen back into the abyss of his own desperate mind.

Lilly didn't say a word. She sat opposite him, staring down at her thin, wasted hands, seeing nothing, thinking nothing. The scarf she was trying to knit had fallen from her fingers and lay at her side, its brilliant whiteness incongruous against the dull grey of her long cotton skirt.

An ancient, multi-coloured blanket was draped about her aged shoulders. She grasped its ends with her numb fingers and drew it tightly round her frail body. But she was still cold, freezing cold, and she was hungry. If help didn't come the cold would kill her. It would kill them both. And it would be Padraig's fault. He was and always had been a worthless incompetent.

From a distance there came to her ears the gentle sound of a male voice saying something about helping the aged, about calling on old people to ensure that they were safe and warm and well-fed. And then the gentle voice was gone and on the Northern Ireland channel there came the voice of the Queen herself giving her usual festive speech.

There was a click and a profound silence. Padraig had switched off the television. She tried to turn her eyes round to look at him but she found it difficult to focus and when he came into her line of vision he was no more than a small, distorted blur.

He came closer, the sound of his walking stick tap-tapping on the cold cement floor. Then he was bending over her, peering into her expressionless face, asking if she was all right.

She gave a sudden violent shudder and then was still again.

'I'm so - so - so cold, Padraig.'

'Now don't be worrying, Lilly.' He stroked her ice-cold, sunken cheek. 'Someone is bound to come. Someone is bound to think of us and come.'

He sat again in the chair opposite her and stared at her. And kept on staring at her as if she were the sole source of his thoughts. He knew no one would come. The nearest house was a good half-mile away. Padraig didn't know who lived there. He didn't know anyone in this area of Monaghan, except, of course, Father Murphy.

It was less than a month now since he had bought this old house, situated at the end of a lane that stretched a whole mile up into the hills. Their home in the town of Monaghan had been burnt to the ground, and no insurance. No insurance! Your wife is right, Padraig Flaherty, you are a fool.

The snow had begun to fall the day following their move here to Cremartin. Padraig had walked the mile-and-a-half to Barkers' grocery store and bought a quantity of food. He had been sure the food would see them over Christmas. Now it was Christmas Day and the shop would be closed. And, in any case, how could he even begin to try and force his way through the two feet of snow that covered the lane to get to the nearest house for help?

He had ordered coal as well. Had told Barkers to send their men with a couple of bags on Christmas Eve. Had warned them not to forget. But the coal didn't come and now the grate was empty. And he was cold and Lilly was cold.

Pray, Padraig Flaherty, pray that she doesn't die, for where in the name of the Pope will you find the money to bury her? The garden would do as far as he was concerned but what would Father Murphy say to that? Excommunicate him, with a bit of luck.

You'll die yourself, you fool, if you don't soon get a fire to warm you and a bite of food in your stomach. Not even seventy yet, another ten years of life in your body if you can just get warmth and food to see you through until the snow abates and melts away.

Look at her. Too far gone to look anything like alive. Too far gone to talk, to scourge him with her razor-edged tongue. She'd yapped and nagged for years, ever since the day he had walked her up the aisle. That was a long time ago. And now, looking back, it seemed twice as long. Still, she wasn't bad. He loved

her. God! Padraig Flaherty, can you not even be truthful with your own self and admit that you hate her, that you wish she was dead and in hell years ago!

God! The unbearable cold!

He drew his eyes away from her and turned his head to the window. It was still snowing. Water was seeping in through the galvanized roof and came dripping from the ceiling, splashing on to the floor in the corner of the sitting-room. The sound of that monotonous dripping caused friction in his nerves.

He hobbled to the television, switched it on again and turned the volume up high. Now the sound of the drip was gone but he couldn't hear the television either. And there was two of Lilly now, two of the wasted woman swaying in and out of each other. It was cold, a whole week without any source of warmth, getting the better of him.

His toes were like ice, his stomach a cavity, full of nothing but wind and pain. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

No, don't sleep, you fool, you'll never wake up!

He looked at Lilly again and for a moment he thought from her lack of expression that she was dead. No, no, there was still a flicker of life. Her eyelids fluttered and her tongue came out and licked her dry, chapped lips.

'Lilly.' He said her name softly. 'Why don't ye go t'bed? It'd be warmer.'

She didn't answer, showed no sign of hearing him. She just sat and stared as before, seeing nothing, thinking nothing. If he wasn't so preoccupied with himself he might even feel sorry for her.

But he was very worried about himself. His body had been trembling with cold for the past hour and now it wasn't trembling any more. It was all stiff and numb. The tips of his fingers had no feeling. He forced his eyes to remain open. If you've got to die, Padraig Flaherty, then at least let it be said that you outlived her, that you outlived the wife who spent all of her married life blatantly debasing you, a poor helpless man.

It would have been all right, their marriage would have been fine and wholesome and happy if it hadn't been for their religious differences. She believed and he didn't. In the early days he had pretended to believe because he was so much in love with her. He had got out of his warm bed before dawn every morning and trudged with her to St Michael's for the six o'clock mass.

But when they had been married he had let her know the truth – that he was an atheist, even though he had been born a Catholic – and she had scourged him ever since.

‘Ye’ll not let on te no one,’ she had ordered. ‘Ye’ll still come t’the chapel with me every mornin’ before yer work.’

So for countless years he had followed her like a timid schoolboy to St Michael’s. And every Saturday there was the humility of Confession. And Lent – that was the worst of all – she’d let him neither smoke nor drink. And because he had no trade, and a lame foot that prevented him working on the farms, she had made him go out and do a housekeeping job, washing nappies and knickers, cooking and scouring, year in year out, while she sat with her beads and prayed. By God! Padraig Flaherty, that wasted woman of a wife put you through some hell. And all the while telling you it was for the sake of ending up in heaven! By God! You could kill her. Couldn’t you just, Padraig Flaherty!

God! The unbearable cold!

His eyes turned outwards from his own furious thoughts and came to rest on her again. Her lips were moving. She was mumbling. Poor woman. In spite of everything he now felt just a little sorry for her. The past, wicked for him though it may have been, was over and he’d forgive her now she was near her end. What was she saying? He cocked his ear and listened.

‘... the Lord is with Thee and Blessed art Thou amongst Women, Holy Mary, Mother of God ...’

The insufferable hag!

Her own prayer seemed to give her strength and her voice grew in pitch and became strong and steady. And when she had finished the prayer she looked across at him, the blankness gone, her expression now haughty and formidable.

‘Are ye not down on yer knees, Padraig? Get down on them, will ye! And us might be taken at any minute!’

He sat where he was and scowled at her.

‘Did ye not hear me?’ she shouted, angry, and he flinched under her gimlet stare.

He braced himself and spoke. ‘I’d ask ye, Lilly, is yer sudden renewed strength comin’ from God at all? ‘Tis maybe from the devil ye’re gettin’ it, I’d be thinkin’.’ It took nerve to speak like that to the woman he feared so much and now he was shaking, not with cold but with nerves.

She rose stiffly and came slowly to where he sat, her feet dragging against the floor. There was fury in her colourless eyes. She looked down at him, as God might look upon a Fallen Angel, and he emitted a petrified squeak. Without warning, she grasped the back of his chair and, with a hefty push from her thin hand, heeled it forward, sending him on to his knees on the floor.

'Now, in the name of the Blessed Virgin, begin the Rosary with me and let yer blackened soul be saved!'

In a frightened whimper he said, 'Will ye just let me get me beads, Lilly?'

'That's more like it, now,' she said warmly and fell on her knees by the empty hearth. 'Get me own when ye're at it. They're in the cutlery drawer. We'll pray for the coal t'come. "Ask and Ye Shall Receive" is what he said and he meant it. Go on, get the beads.'

He rose and went to the kitchen. When he returned he was carrying a can of paraffin and an old oil stove.

'Lilly!' he said excitedly. 'We could try and get this thing going.'

She looked upon the stove with disdain. 'Didn't ye say it was broken? That it leaked?'

'Aye. But sure didn't I fix it, Lilly.'

Her eyes burned. 'Ye mean te tell me that that heater works and me sittin' here freezin' for this past week! Why didn't ye tell me ye fixed it?'

'I forgot I fixed it, Lilly,' he said feebly. He hadn't fixed it at all.

'Ach! Ye're worse than pathetic, Padraig Flaherty! Will ye get it lit now as quick as ye can.'

He fumbled with the heater. 'I can't get the wick turned up, Lilly. Me fingers are numb.'

'Ach! Give it here. Ye're good for nothin'. I'll light it meself.'

She unscrewed the top from the paraffin can and poured it into the base of the Aladdin stove. Sitting on her hunkers beside the heater she didn't notice the oil leaking rapidly from the base and soak the floor beneath her.

'Givvus a match,' she growled.

He handed her the box of matches and took a few paces backwards. She flicked the match, held it forward, a grin on her shrivelled face at the anticipation of warmth.

There was an explosion. The flames tore rapidly up her legs. She kicked and yelped madly like a demented dog. And then the blaze totally enveloped her.

Padraig stood and watched, his mouth agape, his mind a blank. And then in a voice that squeaked he said,

'Twasn't my fault, Lilly. 'Twasn't my fault.'

And now his mind was no longer blank for he was thinking, Padraig Flaherty, you're rid of her at last! By God, you need a pat on the back for this!

He came forward and thrust out his arms to warm his numb hands. The heat was glorious! Glorious! His blood began to pulsate warmly in his veins again.

She was writhing, kicking, convulsing like an epileptic. And then in a moment she was on her feet and bounding across the room straight towards him. He jumped to one side and cowered against the wall, repetitive shrieks of terror rising from his trembling lips.

The human inferno was feeling its way along the wall, the blazing hands groping madly for the door. Flames leapt from her convulsing body and tore up the wall. Then she was by the door, fumbling for the handle. It came open and the blazing Lilly fled like a fiery spectre from the house and rolled into the snow.

Get out, Padraig Flaherty, the house is on fire!

He fled through the open door into the dancing snowflakes and tumbled over something black and grisly that emanated a vile, repugnant odour. He sat upright in the deep snow, confused and dazed.

She sat a yard away from him and her eyes were looking straight into his. Her skin was burnt and charred everywhere but she was still alive. God! She was still alive! She was writhing, crawling to him and, petrified, he could not move. Something hot and black and charred twined itself round his arm. It was the remains of her hand.

'Don't worry, Padraig. I'll not die. The good Lord'll see te that. I'll be with ye a long time yet.' There was a leer on her blistered lips and when they parted he saw that her false teeth had melted to pulp. She spat them out and hot, frothing saliva ran in a rivulet down a wrinkle in her chin.

He dragged his arm away from the grasp of her fingers. She let out a yelp of agony. Some of the charred flesh had come

away from her hand and was clinging to his sleeve. Then she was leering at him again through her lashless, bloodshot eyes.

His stomach heaved. A shot rang out like an explosion in his mind. He rose to his feet and looked back wildly at the house, now burning and crackling its way to the ground. He found himself limping through the snow towards the door, horror and nausea gyrating inside himself.

Through the door he limped, straight into the arms of the flames. And now he prayed his first earnest prayer – that he would not survive.

The boy with golden eyes

The weary chain of children dragged their feet up the baked hillside. The Greek sun beat down on their bare heads and fancy straw hats. Ahead, more than a quarter of a mile off yet, another cluster of white Ionic columns shrugged its bony shoulders against the blue wall of sky. A little lizard, jewel green, poised heraldically for a moment, writhed like a whip, and was gone into the shelter of some dry grass. Three girls, too hot and tired to care, flopped ungracefully into the slight shelter of some thorn bushes. A teacher went over to them and one of the girls shook her fair head, slowly and very definitely, absolutely refusing to go any further.

Andy Turnbull plodded past them. He pushed a wet hank of hair from his sweaty forehead, and took off his sunglasses. The light and heat beat in at him. He rubbed the red, sticky patches on his nose where the sunglasses had sat, and pushed them back on. For a moment he paused, pulling his shirt comfortable under the armpits and screwing his face up as he surveyed the ruined columns ahead. They looked just the same as all the others they had visited on Corfu. He sighed wearily, and looked around for his friends. They had stopped a couple of hundred yards behind him and were sitting on a pile of stones. He strolled across to a big rock on the side of the ridge, climbed to the top, and sat down to wait for them.

The view was tremendous, right across the broad, dry plain to a range of brown, washed-out hills. In places, little more than a hazy patterning at that distance, he could see the horizontal lines of terracing cut into the steep hillside. Across the plain the irregular little vineyards were sketched out in lines of broad hedges. Close at hand, almost beneath the ridge, it seemed, a surprising little green lake was an oasis of cool in the parched land. For some reason the farmers had not made use of it. There were no irrigation ditches to take the life-giving water to dark melon patches, peach and apricot orchards, orange, lemon and almond groves. Instead, a small natural wood grew around it,

and beyond that the dry, brown plain, exactly as it must have been for the past thousand years.

Andy looked at the lake and imagined swimming in its cool water, washing the dust from his brown feet, sluicing the sweat from his body and hair. The very colour of it seemed to bathe his eyes.

How long would it take to climb down? He measured the distance with little nods of his head. Fifteen minutes, maybe: twenty minutes in the water, another twenty back to the ridge – he would still be in plenty of time to join up with his friends before they started back to the buses. It was the last visit of the day, and they didn't have to be back at the ship until after five. He eased his sunburned neck and pulled his shirt collar up against the sun, then wriggled his toes around the thong of his flip-flops. Suddenly his mind was made up: he would go.

He looked back at the thinning straggle of pupils, dutifully plodding on towards the white, ancient pillars, and slithered out of sight behind a crest of the rock. For a moment he waited, but there were no shouts, no one had noticed him. Then it was the work of only a couple of minutes to scramble straight down the side of the hill until the shoulder of the ridge hid him from their field of vision. After that he was free to step out, with big, heavy, downhill strides. The last bit he ran, arms out and shirt flapping to catch the wind, galloping between the bushes, down and down until at last, sweating and panting, and happy at the adventure, he ran out on to the hot, dusty level of the plain. He stopped for a moment to look about him, then set off walking towards the grove of trees nearly a mile away, further than he had expected.

It was silent down there on the plain in the heat of the day. No cicadas chirruped from the trees and bushes, no birds sang, not even a cricket or a lizard rustled through the dry grasses. The sun blazed down from a hard, cloudless sky.

By the time he reached the edge of the wood his clothes were clinging to him with perspiration. It ran down his back and legs and trickled saltily into his eyes so that his eyelids prickled with it. The lake was close now, and vigorously Andy pushed through the bushes into the shade of the trees.

It was very different from an English wood. The ground was absolutely dry, and covered with a carpet of crackling, silvery-brown leaves. Unconsciously he found himself walking on the

outside edges of his feet, as if to lessen the noise he was making in the silence. The bushes around him were sharp and spiny, or limp and drooping low to the ground with thick, hairy leaves. There was the faint smell of dry, Mediterranean herbs in the air. The trees, with their bronze and dove-grey bark, were smaller than the splendid beeches and oaks of his home. Strong green creepers clung to the trunks, smothering some dead stumps to fat, leafy boles. The sun glittered through the sage and silvery leaves, and the blue backcloth of sky was always above him.

But the most disturbing thing in that strange and rather eerie wood, apart from the silence, was the incredible number of spiders' webs. The twigs of the bushes were grey with them, and gaps of even two and three feet between branches of the trees were spanned with vast profusions of filigree spiders' webs. In places, where trees grew close together, big spiders had spun heavy webs between them, thick grey strings that snapped elastically as Andy pushed through them. Sometimes he could even feel the snap through his clothing. Occasionally he saw the creatures bouncing at him from the middle of their webs, and when he poked at them with a finger they reared back and waved legs at him. Sometimes, if he poked them really hard, they scuttled away down their thick escape ropes, but more often they seemed to come scrambling up at his approach, almost as if they would like to have a look at him. Once he found three on the front of his shirt and trousers, blotched yellow creatures as big as peas that just clung there, motionless. With an unconscious grimace of disgust he brushed them off with his fingernails.

The wood was not very big, however, and in two or three minutes the water came in sight, glinting fresh and cool between the trunks of the trees.

He emerged, as luck would have it, right at the edge of a small clay beach that sloped steeply into the depths of the pool. It looked just perfect, hard and clean. A minute later he had stepped from his few clothes and was wading in. The top half inch of mud squished between his toes, and then he was swimming. The cool, pale-green water bathed the tiredness from his limbs. The sun beat down on the surface of the pool, friend and foe, making the freshness more delightful.

When you are swimming by yourself, five minutes in deep water is quite a long time, and Andy came in. Two or three

times he dived from the bank, and swam out and duck-dived, but then he had had enough. The sun seemed like a benison once more. He brushed the water from his body with the palms of his hands and sat down in the shade for a minute before putting on his clothes. It was so nice, so warm and pleasant. He yawned, and closed his eyes for a moment against the glitter of the pool. So nice.

They found him the following day, curled up on the bank and sound asleep.

It was a Greek bus driver who actually discovered him. He gave a shout through the wood to two of his sons who were searching with him, then bent and gently shook the boy by the shoulder. But Andy did not stir. He seemed to be in some kind of coma. Horribly, the spiders had spun webs about his face and ears so that he almost seemed to be masked by a thin, grey gauze. They had been busy about his body, too, and the angles of his limbs and chest were covered over by big, thick webs that stretched and contracted as he breathed. Like a young Gulliver, he appeared to be bound to the earth.

With a grimace of disgust the Greek pulled the clinging webs from him with his fingers, and wiped them clean on the ground. With the help of one of his sons he pulled on the boy's trousers, and a shirt, for he had been lying in the morning sun for several hours. Then they picked him up, and with a couple of rests on the way, carried him out of the wood towards the road, more than a mile away.

As they emerged into the open country of the plain, one of the young Greeks spotted another of the searchers a little way off and hailed him with a loud shout. At the same time Andy stirred in the bus driver's arms and gave a grunt. The man spoke to his son, and carefully they laid the young English boy on the ground. No longer in the depths of coma, Andy stirred, and muttered. His lips moved, and his eyelids were twitching. For maybe a minute he seemed to sink back into quiet sleep, then in the most natural of ways put up a hand to rub his face, and woke up. The sunlight blinded him. He had a splitting headache. A man whom he had never seen before was crouching over him, the black hair stuck to his head and sweat running down his face.

'What's happening?' Andy said.

The man gave a deep sigh of relief and enveloped the boy in a

warm stench of garlic. He spoke, making expressive gestures with his arms, but the language was Greek and Andy could not understand a word. He stood up, barefoot, feeling very swimmy. The younger of the two sons handed him his flip-flops and he stepped into them.

He was able to walk around the bottom of the hill to the road, and three-quarters of an hour later was back on board the ship.

And that's all there was to it. The ship's doctor examined him, but apart from mild burning down one side where Andy had been caught by the morning sun, he could find nothing wrong with the boy. They kept him quiet for the rest of the day, but so far as Andy himself was concerned it was unnecessary. Half an hour in the cool, a couple of bottles of cold orange, a meal, and he felt fine, ready for anything. The cruise headmaster telephoned his parents, who were naturally very concerned, but so far as they could tell there was nothing to send him home for. Certainly Andy did not want to go. He had saved for the holiday for the best part of a year and was really enjoying it.

And so he stayed, as the ship moved on from Corfu to Tunis, Tangier, Gibraltar and Lisbon, and then home once more across the Bay of Biscay.

A week later everything was back to normal. The excitement of homecoming, his face tanned a rich brown, arms loaded with presents for the family, head full of tales to tell his friends, passed away; and the humdrum routine of school, paper round and Saturday morning football re-established itself.

But one morning, when Mrs Turnbull went into Andy's bedroom to make the bed, thinking he was late back from the paper round, she found him still sound asleep. She smiled and shook him; then shook him again. But he did not wake up. He had sunk back into the coma of Greece.

She was very distressed, and phoned for Dr Robertson at once. He had already examined Andy since his return, and even sought a second opinion, but, like the doctor on board the ship, neither could find the slightest thing wrong with him. Within an hour he had the boy tucked up in a side ward of the local hospital.

For three days he slept the sleep of the dead. Specialists examined him, and carried out tests that revealed nothing. All

the laboratory reports proved negative. He was just, so far as they could tell, in the deepest of sleeps.

Then in the middle of the fourth afternoon the young nurse who was with him heard a slight sigh from the bed. Andy turned in his sleep and put up a hand to rub his face. Quickly she crossed to the bedside. He gave a deep yawn, and opened his sleepy eyes on the bright afternoon.

With a shock he saw the nurse standing over him, and the white walls of the hospital. At once he was wide awake.

The nurse was looking at him with a surprised, puzzled look on her face. Then it was gone and she smiled.

'Well,' she said. 'How are *you* feeling?'

He lay back on the pillows and looked at the window and the wash-basin and the foot of the bed, then back to the nurse again.

'Like in Greece?' he said.

She nodded. 'Except you're in Ward 16 at the "James" this time,' she said.

'What time is it?' he said.

'What time or what day?' she replied.

He smiled slightly, and pushed himself higher on the pillows.

'How *do* you feel?' she said.

He examined his feelings. He was tired, a bit weak in the legs, maybe; otherwise he felt fine. 'OK,' he said.

'Well,' she said. 'I'd just better go and get Sister, then.' Briskly she pulled his bed straight and tucked in the sheets, then stood back and looked at him critically. Unconsciously the slightly puzzled look had come into her face again. For a moment neither of them spoke.

'What are you looking at me like that for?' Andy said.

She was only about four years older than himself and not entirely sure how a nurse should conduct herself. She coloured slightly.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to be rude. It's just your eyes. I've never seen eyes quite like them.'

'How?' he said. At fourteen he was not used to talking to pretty girls of her age, certainly upon such a personal subject as his eyes.

'You mean you think they're the same as everyone else's?' she said.

Now it was his turn to look puzzled and feel self-conscious. The nurse lifted a neat shaving mirror from the side of the white windowsill and handed it to him.

'Here, look,' she said.

Andy's first reaction was that he was looking at a picture, or that it was the reflection of somebody strange behind him. Then he blinked, and realized with a shock that this was himself. But his eyes had changed. Where before they had been brown, now two golden irises looked steadily back at him from the mirror. Fringed with his own dark lashes and brows they looked incredibly bright. In fact they did not look like human eyes at all, more like the eyes of some animal, a dog, perhaps, or even a panther. He chewed his lip and examined the rest of his face, and looked around the room; then back to those burning, golden eyes.

'Well, I can see all right,' he said. He looked up at her. 'Do they look funny?'

'No, I don't think so,' she said. In fact, to her, with Andy growing rapidly into young manhood, they were strangely compelling. They were the eyes of a boy you could never know; eyes of wildness, that you could never read. But there was no denying that they were beautiful. 'They're different, all right,' she said, 'but they're rather nice when you get used to them. Very nice, in fact. Yes.' She smiled. 'You'll have the girls running after you more than ever, now.'

Rather shyly, Andy smiled in return, and looked back into the mirror.

'I'll get Sister,' she said.

Again the specialists examined him, but again they could find nothing wrong. His eyes had changed colour, and changed colour to gold; but apart from that extraordinary fact they seemed perfectly normal.

Two days later he was discharged. And a week after that he was back at school.

The only after-effect of the two comas was that now he was troubled by dreams. The story he had been told of the spiders in the wood spinning webs about him had disgusted him at the time, but then he had forgotten all about it; just as he had forgotten the pain of peritonitis two years earlier, and the shock of being nearly run over on the road. But the spiders seemed to have affected him subconsciously, for now they

crawled about his room in dreams, creatures of a strange intelligence that examined the cracks in the floor and the edges of the window, and scuttled across his green bedroom carpet through the open door on to the landing. He seemed to see them crawling about the darkened house, hanging from the living-room ceiling, squatting on the table set for breakfast, clambering on to his sister's bed where she lay asleep. Sometimes he even seemed to feel them crawling across his face and neck, and pulled the bedclothes close in his sleep.

But when he woke the dreams had gone, and before the rest of the family were awake he was up and dressed and away on his bike to do the morning paper round.

One Tuesday, a few days after he had returned to school, he was pedalling along the road when he saw an ambulance leaving a friend's house. This was a good pal, Bob Andrews, who had been on the trip with him and played for the same football team. He pulled up to the pavement outside, and walked round to the back door to find out what was wrong. Mr Andrews let him in. Bob's two brothers were having their breakfast, and Mr Andrews was busy making more toast for them. He was making a bit of a mess of it. Mrs Andrews, he told Andy, had gone off to the hospital with Bob. When his brother shook him to get up that morning, he wouldn't stir. Mr Andrews dropped some more toast on the table and went to the hall door and called upstairs to his daughter to hurry up. Then he came back and popped two more slices of bread into the toaster. After that he had time to lean back against the draining board and look at his son's friend. Andy's brow was wrinkled, his golden eyes stared abstractedly at the kitchen table. Mr Andrews reached into the cupboard for a cup and poured the boy a cup of tea, and spread a piece of toast with butter and marmalade for him.

He had no need to say that whatever had affected Andy was catching. The next few days made that plain enough. Two more boys who had been on the trip with him took ill, and a day or two after that Andy's own sister, Christine, had to be taken away to the hospital as well. And on the very day that Christine was taken in, Bob Andrews woke up in a side ward of the boys' wing with eyes as golden as Andy's own.

In charity the newspapers could overlook the experience and misfortune of one boy, but when the strange disease began to spread, and doctors were mystified, it became news. For a week,

until popular interest died down, the children and their parents were greatly bothered by the questions of inquisitive reporters.

For Andy, who had started it all, apparently, with his afternoon swim, it was very distressing. It was, as his father remarked, almost as if Andy was a father himself, seeing all his golden-eyed offspring going about the school. Not that there were many yet, but there were five or six, and more were in the hospital. To all intents and purposes it had the appearance of a minor epidemic, and a few days later all the children with golden eyes were requested to stay off school until further notice in an attempt to contain the virus, or disease, before it got out of hand.

But that was not before the whole town was thrilled by a particularly gruesome and dramatic event: an event which brought Andy close to a nervous breakdown, and in which he knew he had had more than a passing part to play.

Mr Harris was the principal teacher of mathematics in the grammar school Andy attended. He was a fat man, with thick lips and a fine head of oiled, grey hair. His eyes peeped, pig-like, from behind a pair of heavy, pebble-lensed spectacles, perfect eyes for a man of so notoriously vicious a temper. He was disliked, and even feared, by almost all of the pupils in the school. It happened that Andy, who was rather good at mathematics, was that year one of Mr Harris's students. With all that was happening, however, his work was seriously affected, and he had fallen behind. One dark day, the day in which his sister Christine had been found in a state of coma and taken away to hospital, he was even more absentminded than usual, and made several gross errors in a comparatively simple piece of algebra. Mr Harris, that day, was in a particularly bad mood. Unaccustomed to bridling his temper, he made no allowances, and tore the boy to shreds in front of the class. Already distressed, Andy was brought close to tears. And that was not the end of it, for in that state he was quite unable to do the easy examples which Mr Harris set him specially, earning more sharp criticism, delivered in a loud voice with sarcasm and even relish for the benefit of the rest of the class. And at lunch time, having thoroughly got his knife into Andy that day, Mr Harris pulled him up in front of some girls for having his tie undone. Andy curled up, and hated him.

That night his dreams were particularly vivid. Spiders, and

his sister, and friends, and Mr Harris, swirled and swam in his brain. The spiders from the wood were wrapping his bed in a cocoon of grey silk; his sister and friends came leaping from the hospital with eyes that shone like yellow foglamps in the mist; Mr Harris heard a noise downstairs in the middle of the night and when he went to investigate was set upon by gigantic spiders; a cold wind blew into Andy's bedroom from the open window where the same huge spiders hankered up and down the walls of the house, setting the curtain rings jingling.

The alarm woke him at a quarter to seven. He was sweating. He made a cup of tea for himself, and set off on the paper round.

Mr Harris was not in assembly that morning, which was unusual. The boys were accustomed to having his hot little eyes roving over their heads as they sat with silent inattention through the drab readings and thin hymn singing. No reference to his absence was made by the headmaster, but even by the time they came to dismiss and head towards the first classroom, the rumour was spreading that Mr Harris would not be in to morning assembly the next day either; and by morning interval the whole school knew that fat Mr Harris, with his pebble-lensed spectacles, would not be in to morning assembly ever again.

The evening paper carried the whole story. A colleague who normally ran Mr Harris to school had called at the house as usual at twenty to nine that morning. He blew the horn to let Mr Harris know that he was outside, but when Mr Harris did not appear, and he saw that the curtains were still drawn, he went up to the house and knocked on the door. What he saw through the letterbox gave him recurrent nightmares for the rest of his life.

The police examined the body more closely. To say 'the body' is perhaps an exaggeration. What they found were the mutilated remains of Mr Harris, the shell of his body, already drying out at the foot of the stairs. All the internal organs and structures of the body were missing. There was little blood. So far as they were at present able to ascertain, there had been no forced entry, though the upper kitchen window was found to be open. A statement would be issued later.

Andy was very sick that night. And for the next three days his mother was extremely worried about him. He looked desperately ill, and was not sleeping. Indeed, it almost seemed as if

he was trying not to go to sleep, though he was completely worn out. When she asked him, however, he looked across at her with his face nervous and drawn, and said that he was fine.

Two days later Christine was home again, her face, as fair as Andy's was dark, radiant with the beautiful golden eyes. At once she was complaining of having nightmares about spiders. Their parents played it down, thinking she had been affected by Andy's adventure, and arranged for her to have riding lessons five evenings a week for the next month. But when Andy heard her say it, his hand shook so much that he was unable to continue with his tea and had to run from the table.

But children are perhaps more resilient than adults, they are either ill or well; and one Saturday morning a week later Mrs Turnbull was very relieved to see Andy kicking a plastic ball about in the street outside. He had always been quite good at football, and before the trouble started played every Saturday for one of the school teams. Now she smiled as he dribbled around the lamp-post and let fly against a high garage wall with a great smack.

Andy was enjoying it, too, until, growing a little careless, he let the ball sail over the fence into Mr Witherington's garden. Rather apprehensively he surveyed the windows and crept through the gate, keeping as long as he could in the shelter of the bushes. But Mr Witherington was too fly for him. As he crossed the flower bed on to the lawn, the ill-natured man threw open his french windows and quickly gathered up the ball from where it lay among the Michaelmas daisies.

'I'm sorry,' Andy said.

'Sorry! I should think you're sorry!' the man shouted. 'I'm sick of you.'

Andy shrugged, awkwardly. 'Can I have the ball back, please?' he said.

'No, you can not,' Mr Witherington said sharply. 'I'm keeping it this time. I just might give it back to your father with a piece of my mind. Now, you can get out of my garden.'

'Please!' Andy said.

'Absolutely not.' Mr Witherington pointed to the front gate. 'Out!' he said.

Andy began trembling. He was near to tears. 'You old fool,' he half sobbed. 'Give us the ball.' He pushed up against the old man and tried to grab it from him. But Mr Witherington swung

the football away from him, out of reach, and pushed him back.

He was surprised and shocked. He knew that the boy had been ill. He was a bundle of nerves. For a moment he nearly relented. Then he thought of all the times Andy's football had gone swishing through his lovely flower beds, and he had found the broken stalks and smashed blossoms later.

'Do I have to call the police?' he said.

Sick at the throat, Andy made his way out of the garden.

That evening his mother gave him a teaspoonful of the sedative the doctor had left for him. When he went to bed he could not keep his eyes open, and fell asleep at once.

It was the noise of the police cars that woke him in the morning.

Summoned by an hysterical lady who had been taking her dog for a walk, they found Mr Witherington in the front garden, sprawled among the ruin of his autumn flowers. The french windows were open, as if he had heard something in the night and gone to investigate. A carving knife, which presumably he had taken up as a weapon, was lying two yards away from him on the path. It had done him no good. The pyjamas were torn half from him, his stomach was hideously mutilated. Most of the soft, internal organs of his body were missing. Again, there was little blood.

The town was appalled by the fearful murders, and in the course of the next two days there were three more, two over in the west side, beyond the grammar school, and one down near the river. The papers were full of it.

Andy was so distressed that Mrs Turnbull had to call Dr Robertson to him again. The doctor was an old family friend, who had been attending the children all their lives. A simple, gruffly affectionate sort of man, he asked Mrs Turnbull to leave him alone with the boy. Andy had always liked him, and now, in the absence of his parents, he was at last able to pour out his nightmares, his fears, the conviction that through his dreams he was somehow responsible for the hideous events. It was a purge, an inexpressible relief to be able to tell someone grown up, someone intelligent and sensible, who listened and did not laugh or interrupt. Gently the doctor probed, and when he was sure that Andy had said all he wanted, he sat back and regarded him. Then he spoke. He pointed out that Andy had never heard of the three people who had died since Mr Witherington. And

surely he must admit that with Mr Harris and Mr Witherington it could have been coincidence; strong coincidence, admittedly, but the rest of the facts just did not fit in. As for spiders – well, what sort of spiders? Three feet high? He smiled. And except when Andy was in the wood, had he actually seen any spiders? He squeezed the boy's arm reassuringly, and stood up, friendly and capable. Andy smiled back. At least Dr Robertson could shoulder some of the burden now. He knew he could trust him to do the right thing.

He was right. Immediately after leaving the Turnbulls' house, Dr Robertson telephoned two of his medical colleagues, and with them went to interview some of the other young people whose eyes had turned golden. He asked them about their dreams. And he was not smiling at all as he sat in the office of the chief of police later that afternoon. Together they went down to the forensic laboratories.

At eleven that night, Mr Turnbull switched off the television, stretched, and took his twelve-bore shotgun from the corner where it stood, nowadays, with a couple of number seven cartridges in the breech. Like a number of men in the district who owned guns and rifles, when the spate of horrifying murders began he had brought it down from a cupboard and given it a rub over, and now kept it at hand during the dark hours. In the past he had used it for shooting pigeons and rabbits on the local farms, but now it was all he had to protect his family. He broke the gun open to inspect the cartridges, then snapped it shut and worked the safety catch. Leaving his wife finishing a row of knitting, he went to check that all the windows were securely fastened and get ready for bed.

Mrs Turnbull was not many minutes after him. She pushed her knitting into its usual place on a shelf, switched off the living-room light, checked that the kitchen was tidy, and went upstairs to the bathroom.

Five minutes later she had changed into her nightgown and was sitting at the dressing table giving her hair its nightly brush. A faint murmur came through from the next room where Christine was having a dream and talking in her sleep. Mrs Turnbull smiled slightly, but catching sight of herself in the mirror, saw that it was an anxious smile, as always these days. When her hair was finished she crossed the carpet to the bed and kicked off her slippers. Already her husband was nearly asleep. But

before she got in beside him, she thought she would go through and see that her children were comfortable for the night. She pushed her feet back into the slippers and went out on to the landing.

With the confidence of fourteen years of motherhood, she pushed open the door of Christine's room and crossed quietly to the bed. Like Andy, Christine liked to sleep with her curtains drawn back and the pattern of the streetlamp on the wall. Innocent in sleep, the pretty, urchin face was calm and untroubled. Mrs Turnbull smiled affectionately, and pulled a stray strand of hair from the corner of the girl's mouth. She did not stir. Gently she pulled the eiderdown straight and tucked in a corner of the blanket. Thank goodness, she thought, that Christine was taking the change better than Andy.

But Andy. She paused for a moment at the door of his room, then pushed it open, and in the beam of light that streamed across the green carpet from the landing, crossed to his bedside. He was sound asleep. Anxiously she looked down at the shadowy, sleeping face of her fourteen-year-old son. Was he dreaming now? She put out a hand to straighten his rumpled blankets, then leaned down, and very gently planted a kiss on the side of his head. He would never let her do that if he was awake.

Her eyes were open as she kissed him, and the proximity of her head threw his into deeper shadow. Even so, she suddenly became aware of a trembling in the lid of his left eye. Puzzled, she drew back a few inches to bring it into focus. The lids trembled more and more, until it became a positive agitation. It almost seemed as though there was something behind the eyelids that was trying to get out. And then, to her horror, something golden was glinting among the dark lashes of the boy's eye. Like a crooked golden wire something was squeezing out between the eyelids. Within seconds it was nearly an inch long, waving about in the air in front of his eye. It touched the upper lid and was still for a moment, then stretched, twisted a little, and settled itself firmly against the soft skin. Even as it did so, another fine golden wire, and another, were feeling their way out of the dark slit between her son's eyelids. Soon they, too, had settled themselves against the trembling skin, one on the bottom and one on the top. They tautened, the lids began to open. Slowly, something, something fat and golden that soon

resolved itself into the shape of a spider, hauled itself out of the dark, shadowy socket of the boy's eye. The lid bulged, opening wider and wider to admit the globular, marble-sized body. With some difficulty it squeezed through the gap, legs scrabbling on the skin of his face, and then it was out, and the lids sank shut behind it. For a moment the hideous creature stood on Andy's cheek. Then slowly it ambled across his young face, down his neck, and climbed up on to the sheet.

Hypnotized with horror, Mrs Turnbull looked from the big, glistening spider to her son's face. In the shadows of the bedclothes, his right eye was trembling now. Little more than a minute later, a spider squeezed from that eye socket, too, and fell on top of the bottom sheet. Almost immediately it scuttled up inside the neck of Andy's pyjamas, and a moment later reappeared on top of the sheet beside the first one.

For what seemed ages, but in reality can have been little more than two or three minutes, they stood there, still, but bouncing slightly on their golden legs. At first it seemed almost as if they were growing larger. Then there was no doubt about it, they were growing larger. Soon they were the size of gooseberries, then pullets' eggs, then soft oranges. At length they reached the size and shape of fat, over-ripe grapefruit, the coarse hair on their bodies gleaming like thick, burnished wires.

One, the first to emerge from Andy's eye, was slightly larger than the other. It clambered down the bedclothes to the floor and crawled across the green carpet to the window. The legs reached up, felt across the wallpaper for a moment, settled themselves, and it was climbing. For a second it was spread-eagled across the wall, moving as if there was no such thing as gravity; and then it was up. In the light of the streetlamp at the bottom of the garden, the creature hankered about the broad, white sill. Then it settled itself, and again began that rhythmic, almost hypnotic bouncing movement, and swelled, and swelled, and swelled.

When it was rather larger than a man's head, it stopped, and was still. Suspended on eight long, elbowy legs, the heavy body hung above the white woodwork. Thick black feelers moved to and fro in front of its face, clicking audibly in the silence: three shadowy eyes reflected their facets in the light from the landing.

While the second spider crossed from the bed to beneath the window, it reached up with four legs to unfasten the catch,

and pulled the window wide. There was no fumbling, no hesitation: clearly the creature had done it before. As the cool air flowed into the room, Andy sighed, and turned over in his sleep. In the light of the streetlamp, Mrs Turnbull could see the nightmarish creature working its mouth, with the bubbles of saliva or poison shining round about. Then it stepped through the open window, scratched a rasping hold of the brickwork on the wall, and scuttled away down the face of the house.

The second spider, sitting at the base of the bedroom wall, not five feet from Mrs Turnbull, spread itself across the smooth wallpaper and climbed to the windowsill. Settling its grapefruit body symmetrically amid the bunch of angular, stick-like legs, it began to bounce, rhythmically.

Until now too frightened to move a muscle, it was suddenly too much for Mrs Turnbull's nerves. She screamed, and screamed again, hysterically, and rushed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Her husband was out of bed and holding the shotgun in his hand even as she burst into their bedroom. She was unable to speak, only make choking sounds, and point behind her to Andy's bedroom. In a moment he had cocked the gun and flung the door wide.

The room was empty. Andy was sitting up in his bed. The window was wide open.

There was nothing to be seen. Like a madman he tore down the stairs and out of the front door into the garden.

The garden was empty. It was very quiet. The lawn was a flat plain, almost silvery in the light from the street lamp. The clumps of bushes along the front of the house formed pools of black shadow against the brickwork. The autumn-thinning trees at the front of the garden stood like dark sentinels against the lighted road. A thin, crescent moon glittered above them in the frosty air. It was very still.

The screaming and banging of doors had disturbed their neighbours. The next-door's outside light came on and Mr Sutherland appeared at the door in a purple dressing gown. Mr Turnbull called to him over the fence. He nodded, and a few moments later a series of deafening blasts from his car horn shattered the silence of the road. More lights came on. Faces appeared at the windows.

'What is it, Frank?'

'I'll call the police.'

Thin Major Shipton from across the road, who sometimes went deer shooting in the Highlands, came to the gate holding a .303 rifle in his hands. He was joined by his tall son with a .22. A straggle of people began to make their way across to the Turnbulls' drive. Mrs Turnbull and Christine, both very upset, joined them in the shadows. There was a little whispering, then everyone fell quiet.

The men who carried rifles tiptoed to where they had a good view of the whole garden, particularly the patch of bushes underneath Andy's window. Mr Turnbull looked around for his son.

Suddenly there was a rustle, and the bushes moved. Then with a rush, faster than anyone could have dreamed, a huge spider, as high as a man's hip and gleaming gold, burst from them in a flurry of leaves, scuttled across the lawn and was gone, over the fence into the road. Major Shipton ran to the gate and flung up his rifle, but he was too late; already it was vanishing over a wooden fence and high hedge into the shadows of a garden forty yards away. For an instant it reappeared, silhouetted dark gold above the roof of a garage, then it dropped from sight and they saw it no more. It was gone, out into the suburbs of the city.

The neighbours looked from one to the other with horror, and back at the black patch of shrubbery from where it had come. There was the sound of sobbing.

When the second spider made a break, they were ready for it, rifles and shotgun pressed into their shoulders. There was a violent commotion in the bushes and in a second the creature was racing across the lawn. Bang! Bang, bang! The bullets and hot pellets tore through its thin skin and fat body, and on out of the other side. Out of control, it skidded to the earth, crashed into the garden fence, and fell back between the trunks of the trees on to the edge of the grass. For a moment it lay there in a tangle of legs. Then it was on its feet again, hurt, eight wicked eyes glittering in the lamplight. Two of its legs were broken. Thick liquid coursed down its golden body. There was a dry, grating hiss of anger, and almost before they could move it was heading straight for them. The venom dribbled from its jaws.

The two men with rifles had no time to pump another bullet into the breech. Mr Turnbull's second barrel took it right in the

middle when it was only four yards away. The massive weight of shot tore a hole the size of a dinner plate straight through it. In a gush of green and yellow filth, the fat golden sac of it burst open as it came crashing among them, slithering to the ground in a ruin of autumn flowers.

Nauseated beyond words, and too frightened to take any more, several women turned their eyes away. Mrs Turnbull leaned into the trunk of a tree and buried her face in an arm. The earth reeled, she thought she was going to faint.

But as the others watched, even as it spilled out, the piles of matter were shrinking, vanishing into the air. The flaps of golden skin shrivelled together, little clots that adhered to slippers and dressing gowns were there no longer. In little more than half a minute the horrific splash of it was gone. Nothing remained to mark the spot but the broken stems of the chrysanthemums and a tumble of soil knocked out on to the driveway. The smell of cordite hung in the air.

Once again silence came to the garden. It was only then that they noticed Christine. She clung to her father, and tugged at his pyjama jacket.

'Daddy,' she said, half crying. 'I can't see with my left eye.'

He put an arm around her thin shoulders and bent down to her.

But even as he did so they were disturbed by the sound of a commotion in the house. A chair fell heavily, and there was a crash of breaking glass. Mr Shipton and his son eased their rifles in the direction of the front door.

But it was Andy, clad in his blue-striped pyjamas, who appeared in the entrance. He held on to the door post with one hand and turned his head this way and that in the silence, as if he was listening.

'Who is it?' he said.

For a moment no one could speak.

'Who's there?' the boy said again. 'I can't see.'

But in the light that fell upon his face from the lamp next door they could all see him very well. His eyes were open. He was obviously completely blind. Between the dark lashes his eyes gleamed bare and blank, for all the world like two white, shining, hard-boiled eggs.

Christine clung to her father's arm and gazed at him with one beautiful, golden eye.

Double puppet

The whole macabre thing came about in the days when London's variety theatres boomed 'House full' from plush foyers. When the smell of greasepaint wafted through Shaftesbury Avenue like ozone, and the nation between the wars stopped momentarily to have a good time. Among the thriving impresarios and artistes who lifted champagne to their lips, a small man drifted on the brink of failure.

Frank Seymour, on the wrong side of forty and lean in limb, could be described as 'stage-beaten'. The mill that was Music Hall had seen to that. He had 'filled the gap' so to speak from Portsmouth to Perth as comedian, straight man and stooge but remained undiscovered to the West End stage. The reason was obvious – he was third rate. Not oblivious to this fact when mingling with the more successful, he would jokingly claim that he started at the bottom and worked his way down. He also had plans for his future and that is why – when a certain insurance policy matured – he discreetly stepped down from the boards to become an agent.

Seymour, now with a comfortable nest-egg, took a small one-man office and proceeded to recruit acts that would earn him a living. But after twelve months he was the first to admit that he had not exactly set London alight. It was true he had financially kept his head above water but he needed a star on his books – an act that would enhance his reputation as well as his bank balance. That was when Arthur Day and Boris came into his life.

Arthur Day was a ventriloquist unheard-of outside working men's clubs. There was something mysterious about him and even more mysterious about his doll – Boris. Arthur's technique of voice throwing and doll manipulation was impeccable and uncanny. There seemed to be something alive in the wooden Boris and the communication between ventriloquist and doll remained humanoid. At the clubs his popularity never waned

but he could go no further. The fault lay in his script, it was bad and out of date. What is more, Arthur Day knew this but would not alter it under any circumstances. He seemed obsessed with staying as he was and his reason was never made clear – that is until Frank Seymour presented himself.

Their meeting had everything to do with a letter that Seymour received one morning. The heading was flamboyant and the sender's name familiar – in fact, one of the biggest producers of London shows. It read,

Dear Mr Seymour,

Looking through the Registry of Agents, I have chosen you among six others to supply me with a new face for a show that I will open in London. I do not have to remind you of my high standard.

I would welcome a call from yourself when you are ready.

Sincerely,

Paul Bramfield

Seymour could not believe his eyes. Paul Bramfield's signature alone was worth a gold nugget, but his offer was the entrance to Aladdin's cave. He carefully folded the letter then pulled a galaxy of faces from a metal filing cabinet. As he thumbed through them he slowly realized that his books were void of any real talent. In fact, over two thirds had failed at previous Paul Bramfield auditions. The rest could be forgotten. If he was to find a new face he would have to go out and look for it.

Experience told him that established acts would be known to the producer, and even most of the lesser ones too. That is why two nights later he entered a working men's club in East London, collected a pint of beer from a wet bar and sat with an open mind at a marble-topped table near the stage. As he waited for the first act he contemplated the task. Cynically he gazed at the audience – a motley gathering of habitual boozers who at any given signal of boredom would retire to a back room to play dominos or darts. The stage was low – the curtain ragged and stained, and as a three-piece band played the compère, Frank Seymour wondered about the state of the dressing rooms. In a particularly dingy one backstage, Arthur Day was preparing to go on.

The cracked mirror hanging askew on a paint-peeling wall reflected a face of wizened features. Hair flecked with greying

strands grew long and curled above a collar that was bedecked with a checked bow-tie. The ventriloquist applied his make-up, taking his sticks of number five and number nine from a battered tin that had once housed biscuits. Now the eyes lightened and flickered with the simple application of a matchstick tipped with rouge. A pink dab on the lips – a show of white uneven teeth as a check – a hearty throat-clearing cough, and finally a profound discharge of the result into an old sink. The suitcase rested on the lid of an old prop basket. He unclipped it and raised the top. Boris lay neatly folded – the large eyes of the doll gazed eerily at the ceiling. Arthur Day lifted it out of the case and, placing his hand in a cavity between the shoulder blades, held it suspended – the legs swinging with the weight of small wooden shoes. The head of the doll swivelled sharply to stare into the face of Day, and a clear high-pitched staccato sound burst from its slotted mouth.

‘Well, my dear voice, I trust there will be no alterations?’

The ventriloquist curled his upper lip in contempt at the grinning dummy. Then as though he was afraid it would come to life and scurry, he raised his free hand and took hold of the lank artificial hair.

‘Alterations? Your arrogance sickens me. You forget you are wearing out. Your face is chipped, your wires are thin. Soon – quite soon – when you are useless and in need of repair, your conceit will be gone. You will not forget that, will you, Boris?’

The doll’s head swivelled again and stared blankly at nothing. No one heard – least of all Frank Seymour – the maniacal laugh that squeezed its way out of Arthur Day.

By this time, Seymour had seen three acts. Their poor quality had disillusioned him. Even so, he decided to see one more. The announcement was short.

‘And now the act you all love, Arthur Day and Boris.’

A splatter of applause mingling with light calls of ‘Good old Arthur’ told Seymour that the artiste had been around. He sipped gently at his second pint of beer as Arthur Day and Boris entered from back stage.

The first thing that struck Seymour was a technique that had no comparison to what he had ever seen before. Boris seemed to live on the knee of Arthur Day as the coordination between the two – one human, one wooden – became almost weird in its content. The script was a bad one but the agent had expected

that – it was not the Palladium – consequently he found no concern in something that could be easily altered. His interest was fixed only for a brilliant ventriloquist and a 'living' doll. Seymour began to feel that he had found the act he wanted.

Almost before Arthur Day had taken his bow Frank Seymour was wending his way backstage. Waiting in a narrow passage he confronted the ventriloquist.

'Mind if we have a chat?'

Arthur Day gave him a sharp uninterested glance and stopped briefly in his tracks.

'Not if you are going to ask me how it's done – all anyone wants to know is that. Get a book on it.'

Frank Seymour smiled.

'That's OK. I'm not a fan, I'm an agent – my card – can I talk to you?'

Day shot a glance at the doll. It was tucked under his arm but the face stuck out prominently.

'Yes, I'll talk to you. What about you, voice – fancy talking to an agent?'

It was the tone of the doll, shrill and staccato, and it startled Seymour.

'Take no notice, Mr Seymour, unlike yourself I am used to his arrogance – let's have that chat, shall we?'

As Frank followed Day into the privacy of the old room where earlier the ventriloquist had prepared himself, he fought to contain his curiosity. He had not been joking when he threw his voice to the doll. There had been a seriousness – an insane seriousness. True, during his years on the stage Seymour had seen ventriloquists closely attached mentally to their dolls but never with the same fervour as this. In spite of it, however, he decided to humour him and put forward his proposition.

'Excuse the mess,' said Day as they entered. 'Want a beer?'

'No, thanks,' said Seymour.

He watched the ventriloquist fold Boris and put him away. The lid remained ajar and he could see one eye of the doll staring at him through the darkness of the case. Arthur Day took one of three bottles from a shelf above the sink and poured the brew meticulously into a misty glass. As he drank deeply, Seymour opened the conversation.

'Are you in contact with many agents?'

Arthur Day put down the glass and sniggered.

'Why should we be – what could an agent earn from us on the club circuit? It's not their line.'

The fact that Day had used the plural when referring to himself had not gone unnoticed.

'I might be interested providing you wish to do something better – Paul Bramfield for instance.'

The glass on its way to Arthur Day's lips stopped and beer splashed on to his fingers. He gazed unbelievably at Seymour.

'Why aren't you smiling?' he said.

'You think I'm joking? Then look at this,' answered Seymour, taking the letter from his pocket.

Day read the letter in silence then handed it back like an uncut diamond.

'Are you telling me you want us for that show?'

'Yes – providing you change the script. Paul Bramfield won't look at you otherwise.'

The familiar high-pitched voice again startled Seymour.

'Won't do it – won't do it – can't be done.'

The eye still looked at him from under the lid and Seymour felt his flesh go cold. He was also getting annoyed at the apparent game Day was playing. Pointing his finger at the case, he glared at the ventriloquist.

'I'm trying to do business with you – don't you realize that? If you would rather I directed my conversation to him, then all right, but don't play games.'

Arthur Day looked hurt and surprised.

'I assure you it is not a game. However, if you would rather we talked in private, I will remove Boris.'

Seymour watched him close the lid on the doll and pick up the case. He then placed it carefully in the prop basket, allowing the top to fall.

'He won't hear us in there, I promise – you were saying?'

The situation was becoming even more bizarre but Seymour – now deeply puzzled – felt compelled to press on.

'Why can't your script be altered – you *must* realize it's bad – out of date?'

Day walked over to the cracked mirror and began to wipe the make-up from his face.

'In spite of what you may think, I am not a fool, Mr Seymour. Of course the script is out of date, and it will be altered one day – the day Boris dies.'

Seymour could not hide the stunned expression on his face. Day continued.

'You don't understand, do you? It's all to do with communication, you see. If man has communication he holds the meaning of life.'

The agent was visibly losing patience.

'Then how the hell do I communicate with you? I could put the world at your feet – with Bramfield. All that is needed is a new script – simple.'

'Simple, Mr Seymour? I wish it was – if only I was rid of Boris.'

'Then get rid of him,' snapped Seymour. 'Take a new doll – you're not making sense.'

The sound of ribald community singing drifted into the room as the final act of the night was giving it all he had. Arthur Day eventually finished at the sink and turned to Seymour.

'We can continue this at my digs if you like – we can't stay here much longer. Perhaps I can make sense when we get *there*.'

'Suits me,' said Seymour.

Arthur Day went to the prop basket.

'I won't take him back tonight, he can stay here. Tomorrow night's our last one at this club – must take him out first, though.'

Seymour watched Day take Boris out of the case and sit him upright in a straight-backed chair. He arranged the legs neatly over the seat and adjusted the head frontwards.

'Never likes to be enclosed at night, you know,' said the ventriloquist, with a side glance at Seymour.

The agent tried to suppress his feelings but the eventual laugh was uncontrollable. The now familiar staccato voice split the air.

'He thinks it's funny – he thinks it's funny – damn him – damn him.'

Seymour froze in mid laughter and looked at the doll.

'Perhaps when I explain you will have more respect, Mr Seymour – shall we go?' said Day.

About two miles from the club they entered a three-storey house and climbed a sparsely carpeted staircase. At the top, Arthur Day unlocked a panelled door and ushered Seymour into a small bedsitter.

'Not much, is it?' said Day.

'True,' said Seymour. 'Still – if you listen to me you'll be

trading this in for the Dorchester. Now about this script.'

Day took a photograph from the drawer and gave it to Seymour.

'That's why I can't alter a thing while I still have Boris.'

It was a picture of a ventriloquist looking not unlike Day with the doll Boris on his knee.

'My father - who had Boris before me; it was taken when I was a child. You will gather now that Boris is a very old dummy.'

'Obviously,' said Seymour.

'Therefore,' continued Day, 'he was programmed on the script you heard tonight many years ago. There can be no alteration - it is too late.'

Seymour closed his eyes in anguish and scratched his head frantically.

'But don't you mean that *you* would be incapable of learning something new?'

'But, Mr Seymour, I am *him* - he is *me*. This is what my father taught me. The art of ventriloquial communication. From a child I was tutored day in day out in this technique. That is why I am a good ventriloquist - my mind is Boris's mind. We are programmed, and until he dies that's how it will be.'

'But you want to be rid of him - you said so.'

'Did I say that, Mr Seymour? Tell me, how many husbands say that of their wives and never mean it? How many sisters - how many brothers? A real love based on communication has no finish - even in death.'

The thought that Arthur Day was insane had been nagging at Frank Seymour since they left the club. Now he was convinced he was right. One more question could prove this. But an interruption prevented it. Someone was pounding up the staircase towards Arthur Day's door. There was a loud knocking and a woman called his name.

'Arthur - Arthur Day - are you there?'

The ventriloquist sprang to his feet.

'What is it, Mrs Jones?'

'There's been a fire at the club - the gentleman says if you've left anything valuable inside, you had better get there as quickly as you can.'

Day stiffened, and his face contorted with alarm.

'I've got to get down there – it's Boris – God – Boris is locked in that dressing room.'

He careered past the woman, knocking her aside as he went, and both her and Seymour could only stare until the front door slammed.

'Poor Arthur,' she gasped. 'If he loses that doll it'll finish him – belonged to his father – you a friend of his?'

Seymour realized that perhaps she could answer the question he was going to ask Day.

'Yes – sort of. How did Arthur's father die?'

Her voice fell to an undertone.

'Didn't he tell you? The poor man died in the asylum – went completely mad – could throw his voice anywhere. Still, all these clever people finish up a bit funny, don't they?'

'Yes,' said Seymour. 'Perhaps you're right – excuse me but I think I'd better get down to the club.'

Seymour was out of the house and heading for the club in a taxi before the woman had realized it. The smell of smoke was beginning to hover as they got nearer, and Frank panicked at the thought of a deranged man risking his life for a doll. When he arrived at the street, it was chaos. Hose-pipes littered the road and people were being pushed back. He looked upwards to see black smoke clouds mixed with orange flame billowing against the night sky. The fire had burst through part of the club roof and was spreading rapidly. A policeman barred his way.

'Can't come through here, sir, it's too dangerous.'

'Sorry, constable, I must see those firemen over there – left something very valuable in the club,' lied Seymour.

He was reluctantly let through, and as he moved to the front of the building, a group of club employees were talking to a fireman.

'Over there – that's the door he went in, all for a ruddy doll.'

The fireman moved in the direction of a doorway that poured dense smoke, but Frank Seymour beat him to it, and disappeared into the darkness. The smoke forked into his throat and he coughed violently, pushing a handkerchief deep down his mouth. Like a man obsessed and hardly aware of his actions he eventually found the narrow passage that led to the dressing room. It was less dense here, and he could see the room – the door was ajar.

Arthur Day was clutching Boris to his breast and making for the opening. But a tongue of flame drove him back. Seymour tried to get nearer but it was impossible – the heat was becoming greater as the flames spread further towards the ventriloquist and the doll. He was driven back along the passage, there was no chance of rescue now, and as the frail wooden wall collapsed leaving a complete view of the room, the two of them came into sight.

Day was cringing against the far wall clutching the doll frantically to him. The floor beneath his feet became an ever-advancing inferno. Pathetically he tried to mount the wall – but a flame hit his face. His hair rose upon his head then flared and crinkled into ash. Now the red tide bit into his feet and he grabbed at nothing for safety. The end was coming as the cracking and bursting of flaming timber around him became louder. Opening his mouth he turned Boris to face the fire and from his throat there ensued a double shriek – one high pitched the other his own. The satanic sound carried high above the roar of flames – the cracking of wood.

From somewhere behind Seymour, a fireman's hands were pulling him to safety, but he had time to see the charred bundle that was once Arthur Day and Boris disappear beneath a great falling beam.

In the street some few hours later, Seymour gazed trance-like upon the carnage. He mused audibly upon the death of an insane genius.

'My God, what a finale – a double scream. Paul Bramfield would have loved *that*.'

The unknown caller

I lived in fear in my own flat, because of the telephone. Nigel kept ringing me up, you see. I had other calls too, but each time the phone rang it *might* be Nigel, so my heart would leap with panic as I reached for the receiver, and when it turned out to be someone else, I could only just manage to answer normally.

Sometimes I was so afraid that I didn't answer the phone. Then if it rang and rang for a very long time, I would guess that it was Nigel, knowing that I was there and not answering. If it was someone else the ringing would soon stop – then, of course, I'd wish I'd answered.

Another of my ploys was to take the receiver off the hook, but that didn't work well as sooner or later someone would report that the number had been 'engaged' for an over-long period, then the telephone people would put the 'howlers' on – that means the idle receiver gives out a terrible screaming noise, as of an animal in agony. It makes one rush to replace the creature in its cradle.

My flat consists of two rooms, aside from kitchen and bath. I work at home as a typist, so use one room as a workroom and the other as a bedsit. The telephone is in my workroom. If I'm in there when the phone rings and I don't want to answer, I sometimes go into the other room, close the door and wait for the noise to stop. At least the sound is fainter with the closed door between me and it. But it's still audible, especially when one's listening. There's no escaping from it.

One evening I was having coffee with a client in the bedsit part of my flat. She's a writer and I was typing her novel. She brought me each chapter as she wrote it, I would type it out, then return her handwritten sheets and the typescript when she came with the next chapter. Her visits every ten days or so were part of my routine, and I always gave her a cup of coffee before she left.

On that particular evening we heard the phone ring in my

workroom. I jumped, as usual, and muttered, 'I needn't bother to answer that.' She said, 'Aren't you strong-minded? I can never resist answering the phone, however busy I am.' Then it stopped ringing so I knew it wouldn't have been Nigel and wished I had answered. Not answering had made me seem peculiar, and my client obviously had found my behaviour odd, for now she asked: 'Are you being pestered?'

'I do get unwanted calls,' I admitted.

'Those ghastly anonymous things? The heavy-breathers' brigade?'

'No. Not exactly anonymous.' I was trembling.

'Who's frightening you?' she asked perceptively. 'Can you tell me?' Writers are like that – always on the look-out for a story. It makes them good listeners, as long as you remember that they don't care about your troubles, only need them as material for their work.

However, she had a sympathetic voice and face so I thought it might be a relief to open up a bit. I'd kept my fear to myself for so long. So I said:

'It's my husband, Nigel. He keeps ringing me up. I deserted him, you see.' No, I couldn't tell her after all. 'Things happened and now he rings up,' I concluded vaguely.

'What does he want?'

'To upset me, I suppose.'

'What does he say?'

'He just says, "Hello" and rings off again.'

'Are you sure it is him, if he doesn't give his name?'

'I know his voice.'

'I'm sure you're not telling me the whole story.'

She was right. I wasn't telling her the whole of it at all. For what had happened was that Nigel had taken an overdose. I was getting telephone calls from a dead man . . .

The telephone started to ring again. I got up abruptly, rather poissily, strode into the workroom and lifted the receiver.

'Hello,' said Nigel, and rang off.

I replaced the receiver and returned to my client.

'Changed your mind?' she said.

'What?'

'You dashed in there to ring someone up, then didn't even dial.'

'I went in there to *answer* the phone.'

'Did you?' she said. 'I didn't hear it ring.'

Something seemed to click in my head. If she hadn't heard it ring, then the sound was for my ears alone – and that meant that I was mad. Auditory hallucinations: the hearing of sounds which are absolutely real to the hearer but which no one else hears. It's a symptom of schizophrenia.

'I don't think you're very well, my dear.' Her voice seemed to come from a long way off. I pulled myself back to the present moment.

'I'm tired, that's all. More coffee?'

When she'd gone, I brooded over what had happened. It had been frightening enough to be haunted by a dead husband, but at least it had been actually happening, so in a curious way I had learned to live with it. But if it wasn't happening at all – if it was all in my own mind – then that was worse. To lose one's mind itself is worse than merely losing one's peace of mind. I'd rather be haunted than insane. Or were only insane people haunted? Come to think of it, how would a ghost, all spirit, handle a telephone? Solidity was needed to dial a number, grip a receiver. Perhaps I had wanted to believe in the ghost so that I wouldn't have to admit that I was crazy.

I realized how alone I was. I had no one to turn to. In the unhappiness of my marriage I hadn't been able to make close friends. When I'd left Nigel, I'd left behind even acquaintances. There was no one. But I needed *someone*.

I took the obvious course, went to see the one impersonal person who is available to us all, thank God. I went to my doctor. As I hadn't been in the neighbourhood long, I was new on his list. This was beneficial. I found I could speak freely to this stranger who would be honour-bound to keep my secrets.

'What can I do for you?' he said, sensible-voiced, friendly-smiling.

'I don't know if you can do anything, Doctor, but I think I'm going mad. I'm hearing things.'

'What are you hearing?'

'My husband committed suicide six months ago, shortly after I left him and came to live at my present address. Ever since then, he's been ringing me up.'

'You mean it was a suicide attempt which failed—'

'No, no. He's dead. But he rings up. He just says, "Hello", then rings off again. Well, I'd never believed in ghosts before,

although I knew a lot of people did, so I presumed they were right and I'd been wrong, and that perhaps as a suicide, Nigel was earthbound in some mysterious way. I was frightened, naturally, but I'd learned to accept it and I hoped he'd eventually get tired of hanging around and go away. Then, the other evening, when he rang, the person who was with me didn't hear the telephone ring – although she'd heard it when it rang the first time—' I gave him details of what had happened, and concluded, 'So it's not a ghost at all. It's me going mad – or gone mad already.'

'Nonsense,' he said. 'There's nothing mad about you. Your writer friend who didn't hear the phone – there could be a number of reasons for that. Any outside noise, or a noise in the room where you were sitting, or one of those damned aeroplanes roaring over – plenty of them in these parts—'

'But I heard it.'

'You're accustomed to listening for it all the time. You'd hear it if there were bombs dropping – like a mother who hears her baby cry out even if someone's playing a trumpet in her ear. Do you know what I think is happening?'

I shook my head and looked at him with hope.

'Well, I don't believe in ghosts for a start, so you're not haunted. Nor do I believe that there's anything wrong with your mind, except that you're nervous and under stress. I think someone is deliberately playing a trick on you. Had you really not thought of that?'

Again I shook my head.

'Suicide has a more distressing effect on those who have known the dead person than any other form of death. It brings out guilt feelings, and some people, when they feel guilty, instead of suffering it in silence, lash out and try to punish someone else – a futile attempt to transfer the blame. Did you feel that any of your husband's friends or relations blamed you for his death and hated you for it?'

'Yes! Oh, yes! His family – that is, his parents and one brother – they turned against me completely. They wouldn't speak to me at the funeral. They cut me dead. It was horrible.'

'And you've been feeling guilty yourself?'

'Of course I have. I left him, then he did this thing—'

'So you were in a state of mind to believe that your husband's spirit was having a go at you from the "other side", whereas I

find it likely that some living relative is having a go at you by making these calls. He's "avenging" the death, putting all the blame on you, probably to avoid feeling guilt himself.'

'It's Nigel's voice.'

'Many people can imitate a voice. What's the brother like?'

'Colin? Rather like Nigel. Younger. He was very fond of Nigel. At the funeral, he glared at me as if he wanted to kill me.'

'And it hasn't crossed your mind that he may be trying to frighten you to death instead? Is his voice anything like your husband's?'

'Yes. It's very similar.'

'Now, look, I'm not accusing this man. I know nothing about him. But someone is playing this trick and it's up to you to find out who. I suggest you get in touch with the brother, ask him if he's been telephoning you. Even if he denies it, and is doing it, it might stop him if he realizes you've twigged. If it's not him, he may have some idea who it is.'

'Why didn't I think of any of this for myself?'

'Because you've been swamped by your own sense of guilt. You were a sitting duck for a hoaxer. There's no need for you to feel so blameworthy, you know. We all have tragedies and let-downs in our lives, but we don't kill ourselves because of them. No one is responsible for a suicide except the suicide himself. If the death wish is part of his nature, then it's sheer chance which particular incident is his "last straw". The suicide hates life. Sooner or later, he'll find an excuse to get out. Whether you were right or wrong to leave him is irrelevant. He died because he wanted to. Now, you get in touch with that younger brother. Face up to things in a practical way, instead of retreating into the world of your own private fears. That way madness *does* lie. Be brave.'

'Yes. Yes, I will. Oh, I am glad I came to you. Thank you so much!'

'Pleasure. I'm not going to prescribe anything for you. You only needed a dose of common sense. Come back if you need more.'

We laughed, and I went home feeling better in every way. I felt I had something tangible to fight instead of nebulous phantoms, fears and fantasies. Then the phone rang, and my new-found courage ebbed on the instant. I stood staring at it,

the little black animal, screaming and screaming. It went on and on. That meant it was Nigel. No. Not Nigel. Don't go back to that rubbishy way of thinking. A hoaxer. Colin?

'Be brave,' I said, repeating the doctor's words.

I lifted the receiver.

'Hello,' said Nigel's voice.

'Is that Colin?' I responded sharply.

The unknown caller rang off.

I looked up Colin's number. I was shaking as if I had ague but was determined. I dialled.

'Hello.' He answered immediately, as if he'd been sitting by the phone, as if maybe he'd just been using it. And his voice was very like Nigel's.

'You rang me a minute ago,' I said. 'What did you want?'

'Is that my sister-in-law?'

'You know it is. Colin, you've got to stop these nuisance calls. I'm no longer taken in by them.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said.

'Then please will you come and see me so we can talk things over?'

There was a pause, then he said: 'All right. I'll be quite glad to, actually. I meant to write. Shall I come straight away?'

'Yes. Let's get this business over and done with.'

Half an hour later, Colin arrived. He was so like Nigel that I shivered. I had loved Nigel once, long ago, before the disastrous marriage in which he'd turned into a vindictive stranger, and I never knew what had made him change so much, or whether he'd always been like that and I'd been too blind with love to see it. He'd killed my love.

'I owe you an apology,' Colin began, in Nigel's voice, and I thought he was going to own up about the telephoning straight away. But he went on, 'We behaved very badly at the funeral, Mother and Father and I. We were so dizzy with shock and grief that we blamed you bitterly, unreasonably. But in fact Nigel was always an unhappy person. It wasn't all your fault.'

'Thank you. Then you'll stop this telephoning? - this business of - of pretending to be Nigel's ghost?'

'What!' He looked genuinely startled. 'I've never telephoned you.'

'You rang me tonight, just before I rang you.'

'I did nothing of the sort!'

I didn't know whether to believe him or not. Nigel had been devious and secretive. Colin was probably much the same.

'If someone has been making weird telephone calls to you,' he said, 'I swear it isn't me. What does this person say?'

'Just "Hello", then rings off.'

'Well, it's not me, and it certainly wouldn't be Father.' He was looking at me warily. 'Did you know about Nigel's friend?'

'He had business acquaintances, but—'

'He had a close friend. Our parents didn't know, but I thought you might.'

'No.'

'It was part of his problem. He couldn't approve of himself as queer, or gay, as they call it now. He did love you, but he loved this man too. He depended on you to keep him emotionally balanced—'

'Balanced! He was almost manic-depressive – unbearable to live with. His moods, his sulks, his coldness and his unkind remarks – I couldn't stand it any longer.'

'All the same, he was in a delicate mental state and this man will blame you for upsetting whatever balance he'd achieved.'

'This man – was he at the funeral?'

'No. The affair was kept secret.'

'His name?'

'Can I trust you not to gossip?'

'Of course you can. As if I'd want to talk about it!'

'It's Frank Eldridge, the singer.'

'But he's famous.'

'The famous are human, like anyone else. He was Nigel's lover. He's also temperamental as they make 'em, and it wouldn't be difficult for him to imitate Nigel's voice.'

'But why?'

'It's the sort of bizarre trick that would appeal to a man like that; getting his own back by making the widow believe she's haunted. Quite a subtle revenge.'

'It's diabolical. It's also sheer speculation. What can I do? I can hardly walk up to a celebrity like Frank Eldridge and accuse him of making hoax telephone calls.'

'I know Frank,' said Colin. 'I met him with Nigel a few times. If he's the guilty one, he might tell me, as long as I pretend that I've got a grudge against you too. I'll seek him out tomorrow and give you a ring in the evening. Trust me.'

The telephone rang on the following evening. 'Hello,' said Nigel's voice, and I wasn't sure if it was Colin or not.

'Who is it?' I said.

The caller rang off, then the phone rang again. The same 'Hello' – that is, it sounded the same to me – and I expected the person to ring off again, but instead the voice continued: 'Colin here. I've seen Frank about the telephone calls. He said, "Not guilty, but what a marvellous idea! Why didn't I think of doing that, to scare the pants off the little bitch?" Sorry about the language, but I'm quoting him.'

'I had a Nigel-call just before you rang.'

'That just could have been Frank, trying the "marvellous idea". He's a nasty piece of work, even though he does sing like an angel. Oh, Lord, I hope I haven't made matters worse for you.' I said nothing. I felt a shiver of mistrust. 'Let's sleep on it,' he said. 'Leave the receiver off the hook so that you *do* sleep.'

I left the receiver off the hook and the 'howlers' came on in the small hours. That meant someone had been trying to ring me. Frank Eldridge?

I had two suspects now, Colin and Frank – for I didn't entirely trust Colin although I'd pretended to. I thought he was being almost too sympathetic and helpful; it seemed too much of a switch-over from his previous attitude.

On the following day I was tormented with Nigel-calls, more than ever before, and I began to wonder if Colin and Frank, brother and lover, were in it together, maybe taking it in turns to ring, trying to drive me demented. The atmosphere was full of doubts and shadows and suspicions. Confusion was building up in my head, different fears passing through my mind like the quickly turning pages of a book. Who was the unknown caller? The brother? The lover? Both of them? Neither of them, but someone else entirely? By trying to investigate, as the doctor had suggested, I seemed to have increased the number of calls instead of diminishing it. What to *do*?

The solution was simple – so simple and obvious that I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before. I would get rid of my telephone. Oh, what bliss, what heaven my flat would be without the presence of that damned instrument!

I rang the controller's office, said I didn't want to be on the phone any more, so would they please cut me off and collect the

instrument as soon as they liked. I decided not to tell Colin, so he wouldn't be able to tell Frank, and then, if it was one or both of them making the calls, they'd be well and truly foiled when they found they couldn't get through.

There was a brief delay, during which I received a tormenting number of Nigel-calls, but refused to care too much as it would soon be over. Then one morning a man from the Post Office came and collected the telephone. I thanked him so warmly that he was surprised. 'Usually people hate me when I come to take their phone away,' he said, 'as it's because they haven't been able to pay their bills. I've had a black eye in the course of duty before now.' I gave him a cup of black coffee instead, to celebrate. I felt so free!

And in the quietness of my flat afterwards, I felt unafraid for the first time since Nigel's death. Now I would never know for certain who had played the cruel trick, but I didn't care. They couldn't do it any more, whoever they were. I had won!

I had won in another way too. This is my deathly secret, never to be told to anyone. Nigel died of an overdose, but it wasn't suicide at all. *I* gave him the overdose, in his drink. He was already dead when I left him. *I* faked his suicide note, in which he said he couldn't go on alone, after his wife's desertion. It was *that* sense of guilt that had made me so sensitive to a fake haunting. I'd been punished for my crime, but now the punishment was over and the freedom and victory could be enjoyed.

Although so much had happened, it had all taken place within ten days, and it was time for my writer client to come round again with her new chapter. I'd got behind with my typing, so I bashed away vigorously and only just finished the previous chapter before she turned up with the new one.

After we'd exchanged manuscripts, we settled down in my bedsit to have coffee together.

'You're looking much better than last time I saw you,' she said. 'Has your husband stopped pestering you at last?'

'Yes!' I said. 'I found the perfect solution. He can never telephone me again. I've had the telephone removed—' I stopped, suddenly petrified.

'Seems a bit drastic,' she said, 'but I suppose you know what you're doing.' She looked at me. 'What's the matter? What are you listening to?'

'Can't you hear it?' I said.

'No. Hear what?'

'Oh - nothing,' and I went on trying to behave normally, while from my workroom I could hear the telephone ringing and ringing and ringing - and there was no way of stopping it now - it would go on ringing and ringing and ringing...

Barry Tonkin

The fly-eater

Writing is my profession. In fact, I was a born writer, or so my mother says. Of course, I can't remember much of my early childhood, so I can't really argue, can I? Anyway, it appeared that I was a highly intelligent child and from the age of three I would sit in front of the log fire and talk. Yes, talk! but story fashion. Each story started with 'Once upon a time' but none of them were ever completed, probably because I was a very active child and hated doing things for a long time (at that age a long time was anything more than five minutes). But in the minute or so each story would last my mother said I would say the most incredible things for someone my age – you see, my vocabulary was very large and I could out-talk any three-year-old, which made my mother very proud, and she would often brag about how intelligent I was over the fence to the neighbours, who she was sure were very jealous.

But of course you don't want to read about a three-year-old boy destined to become a writer.

Anyway, at the age of twelve I was writing short story after short story. Of course, they were no good for publication, although that never bothered me. My mother was really proud of me by this time, and each time relatives or friends came round for tea, Mother would get out my stories and pass them round – just as other mothers pass round the old holiday snaps and the 'where-was-that-one-taken-at?' photographs. Mother always insisted on 'Oh, you *must* read this one' and 'This one's too good to be forgotten' until each story had been read by about six people during the evening. And then came the praises and the 'What-a-clever-boy-you've-got-there-Doris', and Mother positively beamed: it was the favourite part of her day.

By the time I was seventeen I had written my first bestseller. I decided to become a professional writer and so quit my job as a shop assistant at a large departmental store. After I had written two more books – both on the Occult – I married a politician's daughter and bought a cottage in the country.

The cottage was quite large and was ten miles from the nearest town. The garden was a massive array of flowers, trees, shrubs and bushes with a path running the entire length. There was a garage to one side of the cottage and to the other were lush green fields.

The countryside is the most perfect place a writer could hope to live in. It has a certain quality within it that enables a person to be at peace with everything, and its solitude and tranquillity are what a writer needs most. It was my wife who really made me buy the cottage, because during the month leading up to our marriage, she had been suddenly taken ill and the wedding had very nearly been cancelled. So I bought the cottage thinking that the fresh, unpolluted air would put the colour back in her cheeks. Thankfully, it did.

It was through my wife that I first became acquainted with Mr Arthur Lloyd, who was the chief librarian at the reference library in Oldcastle, a town twenty miles west of London. My wife, Anne, had met him several times. She had mentioned my interests in the Occult during one of their meetings and he had said that perhaps I would care to visit him one day at the library, which housed a great number of books on the Occult, mine included.

I thought this very kind of him, but I couldn't visit him right away as I was halfway through another book, which was, as usual, on the Occult. The book was a difficult one to write, even though I had all the reference books I needed at home in my own library, (which was quite large), because it needed a great amount of planning and often I would read what I had just written and screw the paper up. This was, of course, very frustrating; sometimes my wife would hardly see me during the day, so devoted I was to finishing the book; in fact, I only had three months left to finish it in.

I finished the book with a week to spare and immediately sent it off to my publisher; I was confident the book would be another bestseller. I decided to lay off writing for a couple of weeks and get down to some decorating, which should have been done a few months ago. It is not one of my favourite things to do but it did make a change, and I suppose I did somewhat enjoy it.

In fact, so engrossed was I in decorating the cottage that I

completely forgot Arthur Lloyd's kind invitation, until my wife reminded me one evening whilst we were sitting in the living-room, admiring our handiwork.

'I do think you ought to visit him,' said Anne. 'It was nice of him to invite you.'

'I just haven't had the time, what with my work and all this blasted decorating.'

'But the room does look nice,' and I knew Anne was going to give a lecture on how well each room looked and what a surprisingly short time it had taken us unless I brought the subject away from the cottage.

'Got an idea for a new book,' I said. 'Already written a number of notes.'

'Occult as usual?'

I lit a cigarette, drew smoke deep into my lungs. 'No. Magic.'

'Oh, going to turn me into a frog, then?'

'No such luck,' I joked. 'Actually, it's not white magic, but black.' I believe Anne showed signs of disgust although she remained silent. 'Have to pay your Mr Lloyd a visit; see if he has any books on the subject at his library I've heard so much about.' Smoke trickled down my nostrils as I closed my eyes and bathed in the silence of the evening – the silence which was broken only by the crackling of the flames as they licked around the burning coals.

Arthur Lloyd was five years my senior. He was a tall man – six foot two, in fact – and had short fair hair. His eyes were blue and set far apart, his nose was a little large and his mouth was a cavern for two rows of the most neat teeth I have ever seen. His body – from beneath his clothes – looked muscular, and he gave the impression of being very fit.

When I had knocked on his office door, I had expected to go in and be met by an old, grey-haired man, who wore spectacles halfway down his nose, and who held out a rough-skinned, rather shaky hand. But instead I was met by a man nearly the same age as myself, who dressed immaculately and who sat behind a huge desk, which was bare save for a few bits of paper and two telephones.

'Ah, Mr Hayes, how good of you to come. This visit has been a long time in coming. Please sit down.' He said all this in one

breath and held out a large, smooth hand the nails of which were beautifully cut and seemed to shine, as if they had recently been varnished; although the hand seemed woman-like, his grip was as strong as any man's – perhaps more so.

The intention of my visit was simple. I had planned to talk to Arthur (as I later came to know him by) and then go directly to the Occult section of the library, perhaps to obtain some books, before journeying home. But, as things always worked out with Arthur, this didn't happen – in fact, I never reached the Occult section that day.

We talked for a full two hours, mainly about our professions and childhood, and I completely forgot the main intention of my visit.

It appeared that Arthur was the son of a butcher, and, like me, had showed an interest in literature when young. As soon as he left school he obtained the job as librarian at the same library where he works now and after many years of dedicated work became chief librarian. He was a bachelor, and had never shown any interest in the opposite sex.

The time flew by, it seemed, and soon it was five o'clock and I really had to leave. I paid my apologies to Arthur and promised to call the next day – but then it would be strictly business.

I kept my promise, as I always do, and arrived on time. There was no chatting in his office and Arthur showed me around the whole library. I was really impressed – not at the size, although it was big, but at the condition of the place, which was immaculately kept and so were the books; I learned later that each book was fitted with a new cover every six months.

We strolled around the library until we came to the Occult section, which was positioned at the far end of the library, well away from the rest of the sections. Every book imaginable on the Occult was there and I greatly enjoyed selecting some on Black Magic.

After a long time, I finally left the library, carefully clutching five heavy volumes. Arthur had told me there was no hurry over returning them and I planned to take my time.

As the months rolled by, Arthur and I became the best of friends. I would often call at his beautiful house in Oldcastle and spend an evening there, smoking, drinking or just talking of

days long gone. It was a strange thing, but for some reason he would never spend an evening at my cottage. He never said why, although I think he didn't like the idea of disturbing Anne and myself, but why he thought this I shall never know.

Two months later Arthur suffered a heart attack. He was well the previous day for I had seen him, but the following morning, while working in his office, he collapsed and was rushed to hospital, where he was a patient for three months.

I said earlier that Arthur seemed to be very fit, and indeed he was, for he did exercises each morning before going to work. But his doctor said that his heart was not as strong as it should have been, and the exercises were too strenuous.

After only two weeks Arthur was said to have only a few days left on this earth, but so strong was his will to live that after another fortnight he was able to receive visitors. I, of course, was the first one to visit him.

Two months later Arthur left the hospital, although he was not fit enough to go back to work. The first I heard of this was when I received a letter, requesting me to visit him one evening during the week. The letter did not give any information about his health, although I assumed he must be recovering quickly. I decided to go the following evening and set about writing in a good and clear mind.

I arrived at Arthur's house the following evening at eight o'clock. We were both very pleased to see each other, although Arthur apologized for his poor clothing. 'Had I known you were coming,' he said, 'I would have put on something decent.' He relieved me of my coat and quickly ushered me into his large and cosy sitting-room. There were two deep armchairs situated near the blazing log fire and I seated myself in one. Arthur poured me a scotch and handed it to me.

'Aren't you having one?' I asked.

'The doctor says I'm not to. No cigarettes, either,' he said as I offered him one.

'How are you coping?'

'My neighbour pops in every morning on her way to the shops to ask if I want anything. Nice old soul; cooks my dinner sometimes.'

As he sat down almost opposite me, I had my first real chance since I arrived to study him. He had aged considerably. His hair

around his temples had greyed, his skin looked rough and pale, his eyes bored right through me when he looked at me. In fact, his presence was rather disturbing.

'Don't think me rude,' I said, 'but why have you never married?'

He smiled. 'I never had a need to marry: I'm quite happy on my own. Anyway, I'd be a burden now.'

For some reason, the evening lacked conversation. Arthur probably didn't feel like a lot of talking, and I didn't know what to say to a man who mustn't get excited. All in all, the evening was rather dismal.

I was beginning to think of leaving when a loud buzzing sounded above my head, and looking up I saw a large fly leave the ceiling and land on the coffee-table which separated Arthur from me. 'First fly I've seen for—'

Arthur had also seen the fly and was looking at it with extreme interest and, or so I thought, what seemed to be hunger. His eyes had turned bloodshot and saliva dribbled from his half-open mouth on to his chin. I wanted to say something – anything – but instead watched the amazing spectacle going on before me.

The fly hadn't moved but Arthur had very slowly moved forward and his eyes were crimson. My brain screamed at me to leave this house and never return, But – and God forgive me – I didn't: I seemed rooted to the chair.

From between Arthur's lips, and from between his two rows of beautiful teeth, there came a – *tongue*. I call it a 'tongue' for lack of better words to describe it. It grew and grew and was all colours and yet no colours; it was scaly, bore horrible and repulsive protuberances, and was wet with spittle. It grew even more and reached the coffee-table, and like a tiger stalking its prey it crept towards the defenceless fly.

I wanted to scream, shout, get up and kick the table so to enable the fly to escape; but I remained silent and seated.

Faster than the fly could detect, the *tongue* gave it a tremendous blow that did not kill but stunned the poor thing. Then it was scooped up, and the *tongue* disappeared into the dark caverns of Arthur's mouth.

He turned towards me and smiled. I stared at him in disbelief and then my senses returned. I got up and ran, screaming, from the house. A hundred yards further on I fell and was sick.

I looked back and saw Arthur's house – a house that will remain in my mind, like Arthur himself, whose face will haunt me for all eternity.

I am a writer of the Occult, not the macabre. I think it best to leave this sort of story to that sort of writer.

Harry E. Turner

It's hungry

Salaman was not a particularly large person. He was of average height and comfortably covered, certainly, but not large. He did, however, possess the most enormous appetite of any man I have ever met. It was, in a word, prodigious.

I first encountered him in Venice a couple of years ago when we were both delegates at some half-baked international conference to do with, albeit vaguely, the preservation of the world's natural resources. I was playing truant from one of the afternoon sessions and basking at the poolside of the Hotel Cipriani when I made his acquaintance.

I had just raised a frosted glass of Daquiri to my lips when I saw a waiter carrying an enormous tray of cold meat to a sun-bather situated a few yards to my right. The recipient of this carnivore's banquet, a bookish fellow with blue eyes and untidy hair, sat up and took the tray eagerly. A large, pink ham had been thinly sliced into succulent oval discs and was accompanied by what looked like two pounds of underdone beef. A wedge of salami gave the whole display its final touch.

The waiter bowed stiffly and went gliding off across the lawns while my literary-looking fellow set about the meat with astonishing gusto. He didn't so much eat the food as wolf it down like an animal. Each hunk was rammed into his mouth and swallowed with apparently little or no mastication. The gluttonous exhibition was made only slightly less offensive by the fact that he did sip occasionally from a glass of Lafitte '59. Within ten minutes the tray was clean and the man stretched out under a striped parasol and dozing gently. I returned to my Harold Robbins (a man should never be without one when travelling alone), and began to pick up the thread. It was difficult to concentrate for some reason and I had re-read a passage which seemed to have created a new record for inventing alternative words for the female genitalia when my flagging attention was again deflected to my neighbour.

He was sitting cross-legged and eating furiously from a paper bag of gigantic chocolate truffles. Now in my view, and that of most civilized men, a chocolate truffle should be consumed slowly, almost sensuously, so that the confectioner's art be properly appreciated. This fellow was sending them down his throat with a voracity that could only be described as reckless. I must have been staring at him rather pointedly because he suddenly turned and met my gaze. His eyes were friendly and he smiled warmly. I adopted what I hoped was an expression of extreme unction and executed an imperceptible, disapproving sniff, one of my specialities. For reply, the impudent fellow winked and poked another handful of truffles down his gullet. I managed to absorb myself in Robbins for a further half hour – the heroine, having been impaled by a dozen or so drink-crazed Berber tribesmen, was now hosting a cocktail party in a Manhattan penthouse wearing a silk gown that displayed her pantherish curves to great effect. I let the novel fall lightly on to my chest and tried to sleep. As oblivion was about to claim me I was snapped rudely back to consciousness by a sharp, cracking sound on my right. He was eating nuts now. Breaking open the shells with his teeth and crunching up their kernels with scant regard for his neighbours. This was too much and I leant towards him, an admonitory finger raised.

'May I ask you,' I said imperiously, 'to eat a little less ostentatiously? The noise of your relentless consumption is shattering what would otherwise be an atmosphere of blissful tranquillity.'

He raised his eyebrows and then grinned.

'My goodness,' he said, 'what an elegant rebuke. My chewing disturbs you, I take it?'

'It most certainly does,' I replied, with growing irritation.

He placed his bag of Brazils carefully on the grass and picked up a slim, gold cigarette case.

'Smoke?' he said nonchalantly.

I was perplexed. He had such an open, winsome face – and I did rather fancy a cigarette.

'They're Turkish,' he said, 'imported specially from Istanbul. Go on. Try one.'

He snapped open the case and proffered it. I took one of the oval cigarettes and placed it between my lips. He leant across and lit it with an onyx variflame.

'I am really most sorry,' he said easily, 'that my eating has upset you. It was rather thoughtless of me.'

'Well, it wasn't *that* bad,' I mumbled, melting to his charm.

'Oh yes it *was*,' he insisted. 'Absolutely frightful. It's a – well – a sort of compulsion really. Perhaps – no, why should I bore you with my troubles? May I suggest you join me in the bar at seven-thirty this evening. I'd like to buy you a glass of champagne to make amends.'

I protested weakly but he was adamant. 'It's the very *least* I can do,' he proclaimed, smiling broadly.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon with Robbins – the hero unexpectedly turning out to be sexually ambidextrous *and* partial to a little light whipping. The climax was well organized and spectacular – it would some day make a super film costing eight million dollars. I closed the book and decided on a swim. A cooling immersion was always advisable after the last chapter of a Robbins novel.

The Hotel Cipriani is about the most perfect hotel in the world. Its location helps. It is situated on a small island opposite the St Mark's Basin, across the water the fabulous skyline of Venice gleams against a backdrop of purest azure. The whole place is like a brilliantly designed theatrical set – as indeed in some ways it is. The staff of the Cipriani glide effortlessly about their duties treating all of their guests like princes – or even kings.

I went to my room and changed into a silk suit I had purchased earlier that month in New York – sloppy attire in the formal bars and restaurant are not allowed at the Cipriani. At seven-thirty I entered the bar, already filling with elegant men and women, and looked for my donnish gourmet-manqué. He was seated at the far end of the room nursing a goblet of champagne.

He saw me and waved. 'Just this minute pulled the cork,' he explained. 'Do join me.'

I hoisted myself on to the upholstered stool and took a goblet from him. It was ice cold, and delicious, a pink champagne with just the right amount of 'bite'.

'My name is Salaman,' he said, extending a hand.

'Turner,' I said, shaking it, 'Gregory Turner'. He sipped his champagne and for a moment I thought we were going to

embark on one of those embarrassed silences that spring up between total strangers.

'You're a doctor, aren't you?' he said suddenly. 'Forgive me, but I saw your name in the register.'

I nodded. 'Yes, I am a doctor. I have a practice in New York.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'But you're English?'

I nodded again. 'Yes, but a surfeit of rabid socialism drove me abroad. I have lived in America for five years.'

He thought about this for a moment and the waiter re-charged my goblet from a magnum of Krug.

'Does my compulsive eating interest you – professionally I mean?' He seemed almost shamefaced after asking the question.

I smiled at him; he was young, impulsive. I liked him.

'I'm on holiday,' I said, with mock severity. He shrugged and put down his drink.

'Of course. My God, I do have a facility for putting my foot in it.'

'I was joking,' I said gently. 'To be perfectly honest, it's not your eating that fascinates me – rather the extraordinary lack of effect it seems to have on your size. If this afternoon's performance was par for the course you ought to be twenty stones at least.'

He lit a cigarette and I noticed his hands were trembling.

'Yes, I know,' he said. 'I eat enough for six men every day. Fortunately I am a moderately wealthy man – I can indulge my affliction without ruining my finances.'

'Why do you do it?' I asked him casually.

He drew hard on the cigarette and then crushed it out in an ashtray. 'I have to,' he said.

I studied his face. It was sad, even mournful, but there was no hint of dissipation.

'Have you tried talking with a psychiatrist?' I said. 'Eating too much is usually an act of over-compensation for some imagined deprivation.'

'Well, I've hardly been deprived,' he said, 'either materially or intellectually. No, sir, it's not a psychiatrist that I need.'

'Then perhaps a powerful appetite depressant,' I said. 'There are some very good ones available, it might just break down the habit.'

He twirled the stem of his champagne glass and smiled ruefully. 'Useless,' he said. 'Dr Enzo Fabrizzi prescribed some for me. They didn't work.'

'Dr Fabrizzi?' I said, with some surprise. 'Isn't he the most celebrated authority on tropical diseases in the world – and, if my memory serves me, a Nobel Prize-winner too?'

'That's him,' said Salaman, 'he has a palazzo overlooking the Grand Canal. I'm dining with him later this evening.'

I decided to lighten the conversation. 'I hope his larder is well stocked,' I said, and Salaman laughed.

'Oh yes. Dr Fabrizzi is intimately aware of my condition.'

'Nevertheless,' I continued cheerfully, 'a large meal in a palazzo overlooking the Grand Canal is hardly an irksome chore.'

'Certainly not,' he nodded in agreement. 'I really shouldn't grumble at all. Anyway, the object of our meeting this evening was for me to apologize for my behaviour this afternoon.'

I raised my glass. 'Apologies are unnecessary. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance.'

He glanced at his watch. 'A motor launch is picking me up in ten minutes – can I offer you a lift to St Mark's?'

'That's very kind,' I said. 'I had planned on a quiet supper at Harry's Bar. A lift would be most acceptable.'

Half an hour later we had said goodbye and I was strolling along the Riva Degli Schiavoni among the smiling, jostling Venetians and the gaping tourists.

Venice is a painfully beautiful city which, through ignorance and greed, has been allowed to deteriorate and crumble from industrial pollution and progress, until only now – in the latter half of the twentieth century – a 'Venice in Peril' organization has started the massive task of saving her beauty for the world.

I arrived at Harry's Bar with the usual feeling of nostalgia. It's a small, unpretentious place, surprisingly so, for its reputation is legendary. There, mingling with the fashionable people at the long bar are the ghosts of Hemingway and Errol Flynn and other great names of the past.

I ordered a large Campari and checked my table reservation. I have never minded eating alone, indeed I prefer it, and the food at Harry's Bar is too exquisite to be spoiled by conversation. A waiter showed me to a corner table and presented me with a menu. As I glanced down the bill of fare I thought of Salaman

feasting at his grand palazzo and I felt suddenly quite sad. His condition was very strange, even unique, and I pondered on it. It was curious that he should have consulted Dr Fabrizio whose exclusive speciality was tropical diseases. I couldn't fathom it. Fabrizio was rich, autocratic, brilliant and normally quite uninterested in people with such mundane problems as over-indulgence.

The meal and the wine were faultless and after paying the bill I decided upon a leisurely stroll back to St Mark's where at one of the open-air cafés I would complete the evening with coffee, Sambucca and a cigar. It was dark outside, with big stars scattered against the velvet backdrop of the sky and the air smelt musky and warm. I walked slowly to St Mark's, marvelling afresh at the fabulous blend of Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic elements that made up the basilica.

The square was packed and a small orchestra was playing outside Florian's. I sat in one of the wicker chairs and ordered my Sambucca and coffee. I was just about to light a cigar when I saw Salaman sitting about three tables away; he was alone and eating a huge plateful of spaghetti.

He saw me almost at once and grinned sheepishly. 'Come and join me,' he said, beckoning with his fork. I signalled for the waiter to move my tray and went across to Salaman's table.

'How was Dr Fabrizio?' I enquired.

Salaman shrugged. 'Oh, much the same. He examined me. Then we had dinner. It was superb. A specially prepared macaroni pie burnished with crusts of sugar and cinnamon and stuffed with chicken livers, hard-boiled eggs, sliced ham and truffles.'

'But it wasn't enough for you?' I said, pointing at his piled plate.

He coloured slightly and shook his head. 'An hour after we had eaten I was in an *agony* of hunger. This should see me through until the early hours. *I hope.*'

He plunged his fork into the spaghetti and twirled up a mound of glistening pipes. A gutted loaf lay on his side plate and he scooped up the remaining crumbs with his free hand.

'Was Dr Fabrizio able to offer any solution to your problem?' I asked.

Salaman gulped down a mouthful of food and sighed. 'No solution. No *cure*. He just wants to *observe*. He's X-rayed me

again. Damn waste of time. But he is a good host. I mustn't be ungracious.'

'Why did he X-ray you?' I asked.

'God knows,' said Salaman. 'Probably to see if I had hollow legs!' he laughed harshly.

I reached out and touched his arm. 'Listen,' I said, 'would you agreed to become my patient? I'd like to help you if I can.'

Salaman's face lit up.

'That's very decent of you, old boy. Very decent indeed. I don't seem to be getting anywhere with Fabrizzi.'

'Well, frankly,' I said, picking my words with care, 'you're not exactly his subject matter, are you?'

Salaman nodded gloomily. 'That's what I reckoned.'

He finished his meal and we strolled to the water's edge opposite the Doge's Palace where a motor launch was waiting. Five minutes later we were in the lobby of the Hotel Cipriani. I bought him a cognac in the bar and we lit a final cheroot each before retiring.

'With your permission,' I said, 'I should like to telephone Dr Fabrizzi tomorrow and tell him that I am taking you on as my private patient.'

Salaman nodded. 'Of course. I'll miss his cuisine but I'm sure he only regarded me as an interesting freak. Don't take this amiss, Gregory, but I *am* a hopeless case.'

I smiled and drew hard on my cheroot.

'We shall see,' I said. 'We shall see.'

The next morning was overcast and a strong breeze was whipping the lagoon into tiny crescents of foam. I breakfasted in my room and after a shower I telephoned Dr Fabrizzi. He was curt, even disdainful and told me I was wasting my time. I rose to this and told him that Salaman was keen to change physicians. Fabrizzi's mood changed and he became placatory.

'May I perhaps have his X-rays?' I asked.

There was a brief silence. 'They have been mislaid,' he said, and his tone was quite unconvincing. Our conversation ended on a note of icy politeness and I went down to the lobby. Salaman was waiting, reading a copy of the *Financial Times*.

'Fabrizzi wants to keep your X-rays,' I said. 'He wasn't very cooperative.'

'X-rays?' said Salaman. 'Why didn't you mention them last

night? I lifted a set from Dr Fabrizzi's study. Thought I should have a copy – seeing as they *are* of my insides.'

'Where are they?' I asked. 'May I see them?'

'Upstairs in my room,' he said. 'I'll fetch them.'

We sat on the terrace and I spread the half-dozen X-rays on the small marble table. What I saw made my heart miss a beat and a feeling of the utmost horror suddenly engulfed me.

Salaman gripped my arm. 'What's the matter, Gregory?' he said anxiously. 'You've gone quite pale.'

I pulled myself together and forced a laugh. 'It's nothing, I assure you. Tell me one thing, though. Have you ever been to the tropics?'

He nodded. 'Yes, I spent a year in Borneo. A great experience. Had a two-month trek in the jungle. No fevers or anything if that's what you're thinking.'

'No,' I said, 'but your prodigious eating started when you left Borneo?'

He scratched his head and thought. 'Not for about eighteen months.'

'I want you to listen to me very carefully. I think there is a chance of solving your problem. But it will require great courage and, above all, considerable willpower on your part.'

He leant forward eagerly. 'I'll try anything once. What do I have to do?'

I placed my hand on his arm. 'Trust me,' I said.

By midday Venice was a cauldron and I decided to spend the afternoon as usual by the poolside. Salaman had some shopping to attend to and after agreeing to meet me in the evening went off in a motor launch to St Mark's.

Alone under the shade of a Cipriani umbrella I took out the X-ray photographs and re-examined them. Dr Fabrizzi was no quack so I could presume they were absolutely genuine. It was something of a miracle that Salaman was still alive, so advanced was his condition. It was then that I decided my course of action. Conventional treatment was clearly out of the question; all the textbooks and case histories would have only prescribed drugs for the early stages of the complaint. My plan was revolutionary, and, as I had warned Salaman, dangerous too. Later in my room, I mixed a phial of special liquid made from various ingredients purchased in a Venetian pharmacy, and

added to the fluid a pinch of granulated bone meal.

I must confess, as I heated the preparation over a candle flame, I experienced a twinge of apprehension, but it soon passed. Finally, I allowed the liquid to cool and then corked it securely. Salaman reappeared at six o'clock, laden with parcels, and went immediately upstairs to take a shower.

I allowed a decent interval to pass and then went to his suite and knocked at the door. He let me in and waved me to a chair. He was clad in white slacks and a blue silk monogrammed shirt. Parcels littered the floor, spilling their contents. The purchases he had made that day were expensive, most of them items of clothing or leather shoes.

'I've got to eat,' he said with sudden urgency. 'My guts are in a knot.'

I shook my head slowly and produced my little phial of cloudy, innocuous looking liquid.

'You promised to trust me,' I said, smiling.

He gave me a resigned shrug and threw himself on to a large, stuffed sofa. 'Yes, of course,' he said. 'What's that? My medicine?'

'A very special medicine,' I said, uncorking it. 'Do you have a glass?'

He fetched one and I emptied the contents of the phial into it.

'Drink,' I commanded him. He drained the glass immediately and pulled a face.

'Ghastly,' he said. 'What's it supposed to do?'

'Well,' I said, 'you may not understand, but that little concoction is designed to accentuate your desire for food – no, wait – hear me out. In about an hour from now your desire for food will be greater than you have ever experienced before – it will be a kind of madness, an all-embracing lust to eat. Now I shall be with you, to ensure that no morsel of food passes your lips. It is essential that you understand that.'

He nodded glumly. 'Sounds damn silly to me, Gregory,' he said, 'but you're the doctor.'

'Exactly,' I said. 'I must repeat my warning. Not a morsel. Not a crumb. To do so could be—' I waved ominously, preferring not to articulate the awful consequences of disobedience.

He frowned suddenly. 'And how long do I have to suffer these ravages of starvation?'

I took a deep breath and tried to sound relaxed, even informal.

'Eight to ten hours,' I said, lighting a cigarette casually. Salaman leapt to his feet. 'That's impossible!' he cried. 'I'll go mad. You don't know what an agony I'm in already. Please, Gregory, let's forget the whole thing.'

I pushed him gently back on to the sofa.

'Listen!' I said severely. 'If you don't do *exactly* as I tell you, you will be dead within a year.'

The full impact of my words took some time to reach him. He sat staring blankly at me, fidgeting with an unlit cheroot.

'Dead?' he whispered, shaken now.

I nodded. 'Yes, and it will be an awful, horrible, nightmarish death. *Unless* you obey me in every particular. You are not to eat a scrap of food until I tell you to. Is that clear?'

He swallowed and licked his lips nervously. 'Yes, Gregory,' he whispered.

'When the frenzy of hunger overtakes you,' I went on, 'it may be necessary to strap you to the bed. The convulsions may be quite violent, but I shall be with you all the time.'

Salaman was very frightened now and I offered him a light for his cigar. He puffed at it like a novice, blowing clouds of smoke towards the ceiling.

'We may as well prepare,' I said. 'I'll have to search your room for food. You can help me. Not so much as a chocolate bar must be left to place temptation in your way.'

Together we scoured his suite, retrieving a number of edibles, ranging from salted peanuts to marzipan cake, slices of which were hidden in his luggage wrapped in newspaper. Satisfied at last that all traces of food had been eliminated, I told him to have a drink of whisky and sit down.

'I have to obtain some straps from the concierge,' I explained. 'I'll be back in ten minutes.'

I left him sprawled in the sofa, looking thoroughly disconsolate, and hurried down to the lobby. The experiment we were about to conduct was one that conventional doctors would shun – it would be condemned as a witch doctor remedy. But I was satisfied that it was the only course – particularly as I was now certain that Salaman had contracted his awful condition in Borneo – that seething jungle country where even the supernatural was commonplace.

The concierge was a little taken aback at my request for straps, but nothing was too much trouble for the Hotel Cipriani. Armed with two lengths of stout thong, I went back upstairs to my new patient's suite. He didn't answer my knock and I called out his name. There was still no reply. With growing unease I hammered on the door to no avail. A passing servant eyed me curiously and I called him over.

'I have a patient in this room,' I explained. 'I think he is asleep from a mild sedation I gave him. He is unable to let me in - do you have a passkey?'

The man nodded. He knew I was a doctor and my manner was convincing. He took a bunch of keys from his belt, selected one and opened the door.

I went in and closed it behind me. The room was empty. A gentle breeze ruffled the drapes that framed the open windows. I hurried across out on to the balcony; there was no sign of him. I searched the bedroom and the bathroom, the cupboards and the big laundry basket. There was no doubt about it - Salaman had gone. I swore to myself and was about to leave when I saw a slip of paper by the telephone. I snatched it up and read the spidery handwriting.

'Sorry, Gregory,' it said, 'but I can't go through with it. I know I should go mad from hunger. Forgive me. I'm a coward - but what the hell. Fabrizio phoned me and offered me a meal of such stupendous grandeur that I just couldn't refuse. He says it's nonsense to talk of my being dead in a year. I'm so confused I don't know what to believe. But I *must* eat. My God, the hunger is tearing me apart. I salivate even now as I contemplate Fabrizio's supper table. Write me off as a lost cause, Gregory, I'm not worth it. PS. I'm flying to London tomorrow. Venice palls.'

I balled the note in my fist and threw it across the room. The damn fool. I had to reach him before he arrived at Fabrizio's or all would be lost.

I raced back through the lobby and outside to the hotel's landing stage. A motor launch was moored there, its driver polishing the brasswork with a big yellow cloth. I jumped aboard, much to the man's surprise, and flung myself into a seat.

'I must get to the Palazzo Fabrizio as soon as possible. Please hurry!' I cried.

The man was no slouch. He started the engines immediately

and, after untying the rope that moored us to the landing stage, pulled away into the lagoon. The powerful boat cut through the water like a scythe, its nose rising as we gathered speed. Behind us spread a widening V of foam and a drifting curtain of smoke from our snorting outboard motors. St Mark's gleamed against the skyline directly ahead and the sun, which was setting, shone like an orange orb behind a thin network of wispy clouds. In less than five minutes we were making a long, sweeping arc towards St Mark's. Black empty gondolas bobbed in the swell.

'The Grand Canal!' I yelled above the engines' roar. 'Farbrizzi's palace is on the Grand Canal!'

My driver cupped his hand to his mouth and said, 'Closed tonight, sir. Big carnival. Only official boats allowed. I'll have to drop you here, at St Mark's.'

I cursed, but there was no alternative. I scrambled from the launch on to the bobbing wooden pier and started to run towards St Mark's. As soon as I passed under the fluted column that bears the lion of Venice I was in the thick of the crowd. They surged ten deep around the square, singing and waving pennants of coloured paper. Some were in motley, their faces grotesquely varnished with white clown's make-up. A drum beat wafted over the heads of the crowd, mingling with the strains of violins and the occasional piercing whistle. Desperately, I shouldered my way through, making a path towards the Basilica. Alongside this, I knew, lay alleys and dark canals that would enable me to circumnavigate the square and hopefully, avoid the crowds. After five minutes' scrummage, I was running along an ill-lit passage beside the Basilica, the sound of the carnival still sharp and insistent behind me. The passage led on to a large, decaying square with green-shuttered windows and a surprisingly beautiful church. Thousands of pigeons sat in rows along its castellated walls and a huge statue of the Madonna, which surmounted the entrance, was disfigured by their droppings.

Driven by desperation, I hurried over the cobbles towards a black alley on the far left-hand side. This was a part of Venice never displayed in the guide books; dank, mildewy, reeking. The alley led to a serpentine-backed bridge which crossed the malignant greenness of a small canal. Flotsam of all kinds floated on its turgid surface. I pushed on, conscious now of my perspiring body and rasping breath. Within ten minutes I was

loping along an alley that I knew ran parallel with the Rialto Bridge. Fabrizzi's palace couldn't be more than a mile away now. As I pushed my aching limbs towards the Grand Canal I heard the sounds of the carnival swelling again. The darkening sky was suddenly illuminated by the flare of a rocket which burst into a myriad of coloured stars.

The narrow alley gave on to the bustling pavements of the Fabriche Nuove, crammed with revellers. The Grand Canal gleamed ahead of me, its surface churned into foam by countless motor barges and gondolas. I paused, mopping my face with a handkerchief. To the right was a row of tall, elegant buildings with shuttered windows. The end house, however, was ablaze with lights, its shutters opening on to ornate stone balconies. I recognized it at once as Dr Fabrizzi's palace, having seen it many times in architectural handbooks and tourist guides.

The gates were open and led into a small, marbled courtyard. A fountain sprayed lazily over a stone cherub. I ran to the huge door and hammered on it with my fists. It opened almost immediately and I saw a liveried servant framed in the aperture.

'This is an emergency!' I cried. 'I must see Dr Fabrizzi at once!'

The man opened his mouth to protest, but on a sudden impulse I flung myself past him and into the hall. A curved staircase led to the upper storeys, and acting upon instinct I ran to it and began my ascent. I heard the servant cry out behind me but there was no hope of him stopping me now. I ran blindly along a wide corridor until my shoulder smashed against a pair of carved mahogany doors. They burst open and I found myself on all fours, gasping and exhausted, in Dr Fabrizzi's drawing-room.

He was seated at a small *escritoire* and sprang to his feet at my spectacular arrival. As I straightened up I felt the servant seize me from behind and pin my arms.

'Dr Fabrizzi,' I cried, 'for pity's sake – if you have Salaman here, in this house – you *must* take me to him.'

'Who are you?' Farbizzi demanded, scowling.

I told him and his manner changed immediately. 'Good God, man,' he said, 'why didn't you say so? Salaman has told me about you. He is a very disturbed man, he should never have removed himself from my care. I'm sorry that he ran away from you – but if you *knew* what his condition was—'

I loosened my arms from the servant's grip. 'Dr Fabrizio, I *know* about Salaman's condition. I have seen the X-rays. He stole copies from you.'

Fabrizzi nodded and picked up his pipe. 'Ah,' he said, 'then we have no secrets, Signor. Is it not a stunning condition? Almost unbelievable.'

I took a pace towards Fabrizio. 'Did he tell you that I gave him an appetite stimulant less than an hour ago?'

Fabrizzi flung down his pipe. 'What?' he cried. 'My dear fellow, this is terrible - I've left him in the dining-room alone - to eat - my treatment was to—'

'I know!' I yelled, losing control. 'I *know* your treatment - quickly, we must stop him!'

Fabrizzi ran to the door, beckoning to me to follow.

'Hurry, my friend, and brace yourself for the worst.'

The dining-room was on the second floor of the palazzo and approached by a small marble staircase.

Fabrizzi put his finger to his lips as we stood by the door and then, very slowly, he eased it open. The spectacle that greeted us was from some feverish, maniac nightmare.

The great oval table was heaped with food, but it was in savage disarray. Plates were overturned, some smashed into pieces on the carpet and the tablecloth hung in shreds. Salaman sat upright at the head of the table in a tall, bishop's chair. He was quite motionless. His face wore the most awful expression I have ever witnessed on a human being. His eyes bulged like a frog's and were mottled with a tracery of burst blood vessels. His mouth was stretched wide open, so wide in fact that the corners of it had split and fresh blood coursed over his chin. His chest and belly were bloated, giving the appearance of great corpulence and his shoulders were hunched in a rictus of agony. Directly in front of him and stretching a full six feet along the table was the glistening white tapeworm that had emerged from his gut. It was a foot in thickness, its fat body ribbed with corrugations. The head, with its blunt snout and sightless eyes, was feeding voraciously. Its slobbering gulps and liquid, sucking noises were the most dreadful sounds I have ever heard. Fabrizio ran towards the table and seized a knife. I meanwhile lifted Salaman from his chair. Fabrizio's knife plunged twice and then again into the viscous blubber of the worm. Its tail lashed and whipped and then it fell squirming from the table, a

loop of spaghetti dangling from its gaping maw. It writhed into a knot, unwound itself, reared up like a snake and then fell lifeless across a chair.

I felt the room swimming before my eyes and then, the inert Salaman still in my arms, I staggered to a sofa and collapsed on to it. I saw Dr Fabrizzi moving towards me, his face gleaming with sweat, the knife dangling from his hand – then oblivion.

Some several weeks later we sat in the Reform Club in London, Salaman, Dr Fabrizzi and I. Luncheon had been excellent; duck Normand with calvados and truffles and followed by a crêpe suzette of impressive lightness.

I lit a Monte Cristo and surveyed my companions. Fabrizzi looked distinguished with his dark complexion and greying temples; Salaman was restored to excellent health, save for a little tiredness around the eyes.

'Tell me, Enzo,' I said, addressing Fabrizzi, 'if your method of over-feeding had continued, what would have happened?'

Fabrizzi held a match to his cheroot and puffed thoughtfully for a moment. 'The worm would have grown too big for our friend's body and – with luck – it would have disgorged itself. Your appetite stimulant was a goad to it, it could no longer remain inside its host after the drug had passed into its system via the stomach wall. *Both* our methods, my dear Gregory, were correct.'

Salaman grinned and poured a glass of brandy. 'It's all very well you two congratulating yourselves,' he said, 'it is *I* who has made medical history, is it not?'

We both laughed and I clapped Salaman on the shoulder.

'But of course, my boy,' I said, 'without you the phenomenon would never have been discovered, your photograph wouldn't have been plastered all over the world's press. The worm's body wouldn't be in the hands of the Institute for Tropical Diseases here in London *and* the three of us wouldn't be richer by several thousand pounds. I must say, these newspaper fellows are pretty generous when it comes to a real scoop.'

A waiter removed our plates and Salaman touched his arm.

'I say,' he said, 'do you think I could have another piece of duck? I'm still rather hungry.'

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